Six Days at the Bottom of the Ocean

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Six Days at the Bottom of the Ocean

by solitary_thrush

Summary

In this slight AU, Will gets shot and nearly dies between "Coquilles" and "Entrée." Hannibal saves him. Their relationship develops as Will recovers, then we return to S1 at "Entrée" and go from there to the end of the season. Only a few chapters to go. This AU will be continued in another fic when S2 starts.

Notes

For Kachie, who suggested the the original scenario. Dedicated to bluesyturtle, *il miglior fabbro*.

tl;dr: Want to skip to the sexiness? Start at chapter 7. Episode fills begin in chapter 13 with "Entrée."

Title Note: The title comes from an Explosions in the Sky song of the same name. It's reported to be based on the sinking of a Russian submarine in 2000 following an accidental explosion. The escape hatch malfunctioned and the crew stayed alive at the bottom of the ocean for some days (no one knows how many) before they died. Read about it here. There's a pain in that fate and in the terrible burden of knowing that I try to echo here as we see Will Graham pass from innocence to experience. Think of Hannibal as simultaneously the cause of the explosion and the rescue attempt, and then as the aggrieved survivors on the surface (metaphorically; no one dies).

Explosions in the Sky

How seldom we recognize the sound when the bolt of our fate slams home.

- Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon* Foreword

Will Graham doesn't expect to be mugged as he's leaving Hannibal's office after one of their evening sessions. His mind is on the case he has yet to solve as he pulls his keys from his pocket. He doesn't see the nervous teen who walks quickly up to him until the kid is in his face, demanding his wallet.

Will blinks at him with annoyance. The kid is new to crime, scared, and obvious about it. He hasn't bothered to cover his face nor does he hold the gun, a Glock 9 mm, like he should if he wants to threaten.

"What?" Will responds distractedly. "No, I'm not giving you my wallet."

The amateurism and pettiness of this kid irk him. Will attempts to shoo him away, knowing that the kid doesn't really want to hurt him. He'll give the kid a way out and the kid will run and he'll be on his way to Wolf Trap. He may not even report it – he's tired and doesn't want to sit through questioning about the incident with the Baltimore PD. He'll be sure to tell Hannibal, though. Though this is a crime of opportunity, Hannibal needs to know.

The kid backs away and Will thinks he's leaving. The report of the gun surprises him.

Pain explodes in his leg as he crumples to the pavement, the air forced out of his lungs. He gasps for breath around a white hot ball of agony. Noises of shock and pain rush in his ears with the whoosh of blood.

Training rises like instinct. Will curls on his side to press shaking hands against the hot gush of blood. Arterial injury. Around the dart of *fear-panic-bleeding-dying* he hears someone running away.

Blood pools beneath him, warm and spreading, and for a moment he thinks he's wet himself because there's too much warmth and it's spreading too quickly. But his right arm is pressed against his crotch and it doesn't feel wet or warm. The material is soft against the skin of his forearm. He bought these slacks a year ago at JC Penny. The cashier was a middle aged woman – divorced, two kids – who, seeing no ring on his finger, flirted openly with him. He was awkward and fumbling and annoyed with her for bringing out his awkwardness. Later, he had to force himself to stop again to buy food, treats, and toys for the dogs.

A laugh escapes him. Here he is, lying on the pavement outside Hannibal's office, bleeding out, and all he can think about is one of the myriad indignities of daily life. Violent injury makes the mind fixate on the strangest things.

These slacks are ruined now, he thinks, as he detaches from the moment. He can feel the tear in them where the bullet hit. Beneath it is the ripped flesh and muscle and the bursts of hot blood his hands can't stop.

It's not his own leg pumping hot, bright arterial blood. It's not him who'll bleed out in minutes from this wound. He won't die. Someone else will. This isn't his reality.

But he's panting hard and the little noises of pain and distress are his. Though the cold winter's night gets colder around him, he feels like he's floating. Like he's already a ghost.

He has to concentrate to keep the pressure on the wound. His arms hurt and shake and soon feel boneless and wobbly like Jell-O. He never liked Jello-O. Especially not the Jell-O with fruit in it he got too often at school with his federally subsidized lunch.

Will tries to keep his hands pressed in place but they don't want to stay. He's weak now. Cold. His eyes want to fall shut. He lets them.

Sparks fly in the darkness like fireworks and it's the Fourth of July and he's lying on his back on the levee watching explosions in the sky over the barges and tug boats and lazy swim of river outside Greenville, Mississippi. Fireflies blink in the thick air as though they're trying to compete with the man-made spectacle. The close, sweet smell of honeysuckle makes him feel warm and safe and unafraid.

Will hears his name in the distance. Dad. Dad wants to leave early. But Will doesn't want to leave yet. He wants to watch the fireworks over the river. Their colors dazzle him, take his breath away. Perhaps one day he will escape the earth like they do and burst into fantastic color.

"Will!"

Will breathes in deeply and gasps and he's back on the pavement in Baltimore.

"Open your eyes, Will."

Hannibal sounds calm. That's good. Calm is good. Calm feels like peace.

But Hannibal is pressing down hard on his leg and it hurts. His eyes flutter open. Hannibal is kneeling next to him, his expensive trousers wet with blood. He'll have to apologize for ruining Hannibal's pants, too.

"Stay with me, Will."

Will sees determination in Hannibal's face. Concentration. He's looking at his own hands and Will realizes that Hannibal is trying to save him. He remembers that Hannibal was a trauma surgeon, that a patient died and he felt like it was his fault, like he had killed the patient. Will hopes he won't feel like it's his fault this time. If anyone can save him, it's Hannibal, but there's too much blood.

He feels Hannibal's hand hot and wet on his neck. Checking his pulse. Won't do any good.

Will's eyes drift closed again. He wants to go back to the fireworks and the hot Mississippi summer and the honeysuckle and fireflies and lemonade. Memories slip through his mind like a sieve.

"Will! Stay with me."

No. That's too hard to do. He wants to apologize to Hannibal for dying like this. He hasn't thanked Hannibal for being a good friend and a good man, for giving him support, for challenging him, for being there when Will needed to talk.

Will summons all of his strength to lift his hand and rest it on Hannibal's warm, strong arm.

Hannibal's smell drifts to him, cutting the metallic stench of blood and fear with strong comfort. He realizes vaguely that Hannibal's jacket is covering him. Trying to keep him warm. Trying so hard to save him.

Will forces his eyes open and tries to form the words – *thank you* – but his mouth won't take the right shape and he has no breath to speak. Only fast, ragged, shallow breaths come out.

Will sees worry beneath Hannibal's calm mask. Will wants to tell him not to worry, that dying doesn't hurt, that it's like falling asleep on a hot night. Easy. Effortless.

Hot summer nights flood his memory and he can feel the sticky sheets clinging to him. Not a breath of air stirs in the house. Tree frogs sing a summer song outside his window. He wishes he could open the window so the air would move and he wouldn't feel so much like he's in an oven but there's no screen and the mosquitos will get in and dad will yell.

"Will!"

No, he wants to say, he didn't open the window. He isn't going to. Dad doesn't have to yell.

Will smells Hannibal again and knows he's in Baltimore. He wants to burrow into that good scent so it's the last thing he knows. When he does die, he hopes it happens in the ambulance and not here on the concrete. For Hannibal's sake. Hannibal doesn't deserve to have this violence delivered to his door.

Sirens breach his mind as if from the other end of a long tunnel. Hannibal gives orders Will doesn't understand apart from the tone. Hannibal's hand moves from his neck. His own hand drops uselessly to his chest. He feels Hannibal give his hand a quick squeeze.

That's all right, Will wants to say. *I'm ready*.

Everything goes fuzzy again and the wonder and awe of watching fireworks returns and Will feels warm and cared for. Hands touch him but he's too numb to feel what they're doing.

Hannibal is still near. That's all he needs.

Will forms of final thought of thanks and goodbye to Hannibal, searches for a last whiff of Hannibal's scent – *there* – and lets himself drift away.

Your Hand in Mine

Chapter Notes

> The chapter title is also an Explosions in the Sky song. It pairs well with the final images of this chapter.

The gunshot interrupts Hannibal before he can finish his notes on the session with Will. A sixth sense tells him Will is on the receiving end of the gun this time, and Hannibal, who never rushes anywhere, rushes to the exit behind the building, his phone already out.

As soon as he sees Will lying on his side on the ground in a pool of blood, he dials 911. He calmly requests an ambulance as he shrugs his suit jacket off and drapes it over Will in a paltry attempt to keep him warm. The operator wants him to stay on the phone; he explains that he's a surgeon and he needs both of his hands. He hangs up and slips his phone into his pocket as he kneels next to Will and evaluates the situation.

The weak illumination from the streetlights is far from adequate as he pushes Will's bloody hands aside and shoves his left index finger into wound. The superficial femoral artery, not the deep one, has been compromised, and if Will survives, that will be one reason why.

Hannibal thinks of his scalpel, left behind on his desk, as he inserts another finger, pushing past the tear in the vastus intermedius and sartorius muscles to reach the breached artery. Blood has already soaked into his trousers from the pool nearly a meter wide beneath Will. Not just the superficial femoral artery but the vein, too, is torn. Will has lost blood at an alarming rate.

Hannibal locates the artery with his index finger and presses down to stop the bleeding. With his right hand, he searches for an exit wound, sliding his fingers between blood-wet khaki and concrete. He finds none. Will's odds for survival tick up a few percentage points.

Keeping his fingers on the artery, Hannibal palpates the pulse above the wound and reaches up to Will's neck. Hannibal counts 167 beats per minute. Will's pulse is regular but weak and thready. Hypovolemic shock. The skin of Will's neck is cool to the touch and sticky now with his own blood. The bloody prints Hannibal leaves on his neck would be elicit a far different response in another context. Now, they're just further evidence of the situation's severity. Will isn't supposed to die this way. This can't happen.

Will drifts in and out of awareness, sometimes opening his eyes when Hannibal talks to him, sometimes not. What matters is that he's fighting. It's no surprise. Will is a fighter.

Hannibal hears the ambulance in the distance as Will lifts a hand weakly and rests it on Hannibal's arm. Hannibal sees in his eyes that he thinks he's dying and he wants to say

something, but he hasn't got the strength to speak.

"You're going to be okay, Will," he says with assurance he doesn't feel.

Will does have a chance, and as the lights flash in the pool of blood, his odds increase again. He'll have an even better chance if these EMTs are real paramedics, and competent ones.

"I'm a surgeon," Hannibal calls out before they can tell him to move. "His superficial femoral artery is severed. I need scalpel and a clamp."

One of them returns to the ambulance without asking any questions. So they are competent: willing and able to work outside their protocol when the situation demands it.

He looks at the other one, a young but hardened woman. "Start an IV." The fact that she already has the equipment with her cheers Hannibal.

Will's hand falls away as Hannibal releases his neck. Something he can't explain makes him stop and give Will's hand the briefest of squeezes. Will can't die like this.

And he won't, Hannibal thinks as he takes the scalpel from the male medic. Hannibal has brought people back from more dire situations than this.

"I need light," he says calmly.

A flashlight clicks on and he can see the wound properly. The medic cuts Will's slacks so Hannibal can see around the wound. He slices deep into the muscle to expose the artery, takes the proffered clamp, and closes the bleed.

"Another," Hannibal demands as he locates the ascending vein. Another clamp appears and he thinks that this medic is quite well trained indeed as he clamps the vein shut.

"Two more," Hannibal says.

"We don't have any more."

The medic offers gauze instead and Hannibal stuffs it into the wound to control the bleeding from the still open sections of the artery and vein.

The other medic has started the IV and taken a set of vitals, which she calls out to them both: tachycardia, extreme hypotension resulting from severe hypovolemia. He's lost close to two liters of blood already – far too much. Hannibal expects to know within the next ten minutes whether he'll survive.

He stays with Will, holding the gauze in place with one hand and the bag of Ringer's lactate with the other, while the paramedics bring the backboard and gurney over. Together, they roll Will onto the backboard and lift him to the gurney. He passed out a while ago, thankfully.

Hannibal climbs into the back of the ambulance with the male medic and gives more orders. The sirens start up again and the vehicle launches forward. Hannibal has to force gloves over his sticky hands as he moves to Will's head. He accepts the endotracheal tube and

laryngoscope, and intubates Will as though it hasn't been years since he's performed the procedure. He's careful not to chip Will's teeth. The medic secures the tube and attaches the bag valve mask while Hannibal returns to Will's leg to ensure that the clamps haven't torn the delicate vessels.

They arrive at the hospital before he can fuss over the clamps much. Hannibal stays close to the gurney, moving like he's the attending physician rather than a visitor. He talks the gatekeepers away from the bloody state of his clothes and gets far enough inside to find that, to his great relief, the actual attending physician is one of his former students. She gives him ample latitude, consulting with him as nurses prep Will for surgery.

"I have to call the police," she says apologetically. She's picked up on how special Will is to Hannibal; she always was perceptive.

She offers to direct him to the showers so he can clean up while Will is in surgery. Hannibal politely declines.

"Will is a good friend," he says. "I'd prefer to observe if possible."

"I thought you'd say that," she replies with a smile. "But you look out of place right now."

Hannibal glances at his ruined clothes, still wet with Will's blood, and the dried blood on his hands.

"Perhaps you could direct me to the shower room after all," Hannibal acquiesces.

He leaves Will reluctantly. She tells him where he can get a pair of scrubs and a towel, and soon he's stripping off his shirt, trousers, and everything underneath. As he washes off the sweat and scrubs his arms and hands, he feels adrenaline begin to fade. He's still tense – he needs to see Will come out of surgery successfully before he'll be even remotely satisfied – but he's tired, too, now. It's an all-too-familiar physical state that transports him twenty years into the past.

Images from that time flash before him but he doesn't allow himself to dwell. Instead, he focuses on scraping the blood off where it won't wash away. Little flecks of iron-rich life come off and lodge in his fingernails. They'll distract him until he finds a nail brush.

Hannibal dries and dresses quickly, finds a bag for his wallet and a few other things he prefers to keep on his person when he's in the office, and walks with purpose to the operating theater where he's politely directed to an observation area.

He would prefer to be working on Will himself. He doesn't know the surgeon leading the team. Surely he won't be as careful as Hannibal would. But Hannibal recognizes the impossibility – indeed, the impertinence – of the request and resigns himself to watching closely.

When the operation approaches the two hour mark, he begins to reassess the surgeon. Perhaps he is thorough after all.

Hannibal follows Will to recovery and then to his room on the critical care floor. He'll be monitored carefully until his vitals stabilize.

The police catch up with him outside Will's room and talk with him for nearly ten minutes. They're polite enough, but by the time they say that Will is lucky that a former trauma surgeon was so close by, Hannibal is anxious to get back.

That's the thought he's been avoiding since Will went into surgery. He shoves it aside and sits by Will until the time comes to talk the nurses into letting him stay for the night. It's an easy sell.

Once Will is truly settled, Hannibal is exhausted. He moves the chair so it won't obstruct the nurses' work and takes Will's cool hand in his own. In spite of his tiredness, he sits forward for a moment so he can rub warmth back into Will's hand.

Will doesn't stir. Nor will he for many hours. Shock, hypovolemia, hypotension, and tachycardia don't mix with two hours of anesthesia and the additional trauma of the gunshot and the surgery. It will likely be a few days before he regains consciousness.

But that's also a thought for another time. Instead, Hannibal focuses on Will's now-warm hand in his and lets his chin drop to his chest as he gives in to sleep.

La Ventre de Paris

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up.

Terror claws at Will as memories like surreal dreams squeeze him through a vortex from one reality into another and back. His body is a distant, heavy thing. At first, he isn't sure which reality is his. The strongest sense that he's been here and done this before makes everything seem slightly askew, as though the present moment happened years ago and should not have happened again yet.

The feeling fades as fluorescent lights hurt his eyes. He has a sense that someone has asked him a question. Pain and drugs are the missing variables. They pop into existence as soon as he thinks of them. He does the math: hospital. When he wonders what happened, vague memories rise of too much blood. His thoughts are slippery as though they've been greased. He can't do more than blink at the bright lights.

He hears his name and looks to his left. Nurse. Asking him to answer questions by blinking. He realizes distantly that he can't speak because there's a tube in his mouth, but he doesn't particularly care. Tiredness overwhelms him and he feels like passing out until he finally does.

For a long time, everything is unmoored and floating. He can't do anything but wake for a minute here and there and immediately fall back into medicated darkness. Pain is a distant but constant companion.

By the time Will wakes up, he's come to so many times in the twilight world of the hospital that he knows where he is and has some idea of what happened. It helps that he's done this before, too. But he doesn't remember shuttling between worlds for such a long time.

Suddenly, he finds himself cognizant of the world beyond his pain. He's in a private room with dim lights. He blinks and tries to lift a hand to rub the sleep from his eyes. When his arm moves no more than a few inches, his noise of effort turns to one of frustration. He closes his eyes again, too tired to do anything but be annoyed by the weakness that makes him feel like he's lying on the bottom of the ocean.

His name spoken from his left catches his attention. He recognizes that voice. Hannibal.

Will opens his eyes and squints at Hannibal. Hannibal looks terrible: he hasn't shaved in at least a day and the dark circles under his eyes tell Will that he hasn't slept in a while either.

“You look like hell,” Will says. It comes out as a hoarse whisper and he tries to swallow only to find that his mouth is a desert.

“*I* look like hell,” Hannibal says. A soft chuckle breaks apart much of the tension in his face. He pours water into a glass that can’t belong to the hospital and holds it so Will can drink.

It’s nice to have his throat wet and to clear the taste of drugs from his mouth, but already Will is aggravated that he can’t do something as simple as hold a water glass by himself. He hated the days he spent in the hospital after he was stabbed. He remembers enough of what happened to put him here that he knows this gunshot was much worse. He’s going to loathe every second he spends here helpless, then every second after that he spends in his house dependent on others. But anger registers only as minor irritation, smothered by weakness and drugs.

“Yeah,” Will says when Hannibal takes the glass away. “You look like hell.”

“Well,” Hannibal says as he settles back into a chair that also seems too nice to belong to the hospital, “I don’t know what’s worse than looking like hell, my friend, but you certainly look it.”

Will laughs weakly and feels better. He looks around the room – small, functional, and full of equipment – and tries to lift his head so he can get a better glimpse of his body. It doesn’t work. He can feel a bulky bandage on his thigh, though, along with a growing ache there. He remembers all of the blood now. He remembers that he thought he would die.

From the look of things, he came close to it.

“I’ve been here a while,” he says. He means it as a question and glances at Hannibal for an answer.

Hannibal’s eyes seem more watery than usual. His expression is shaky. Upset, disturbed, and closer to tears than Will knows he would prefer. Hating that Hannibal is so upset on his account, Will looks away.

“Three days,” Hannibal says.

Shit. No wonder Hannibal looks so tired and worried.

Out of the corner of his eye, Will sees Hannibal put his mask back on. Good. Seeing Hannibal upset bothers him a great deal.

“Thanks for being here,” Will whispers. He feels himself fading into sleep again and fights to keep his eyes open. “I appreciate it. But you don’t have to stay. I’ve done this before. It’s very boring.”

“You’ve been shot before?” Hannibal asks.

“Stabbed,” Will corrects, his eyes falling shut. “Long, boring recovery.”

“And you hate that it robs you of your independence.”

Will opens his eyes and stares at Hannibal for a moment. He nods once, tiredly, and closes his eyes again.

He feels Hannibal's hand cover his. "Boring is good for a while," Hannibal says. "Get some rest."

Will shifts his head again in what's supposed to be a nod. He's not going to be able to stay awake. Damn weakness. Damn drugs.

He fights hard to open his eyes one last time. He catches Hannibal's eye.

"Tell them not to drug me so much."

"I will," Hannibal says and he's so sincere that Will believes him.

Hannibal's hand in his own feels warm and real. He thinks about that as sleep claims him again.

By the next morning, Will can stay awake long enough to become thoroughly bored. But he isn't. He has a stream of visitors instead.

Jack comes by before lunch and tells him to take as much time as he needs. He asks Will what happened; Will knows that what he says will go into a police report. He doesn't have much to tell Jack. It really was a random shooting – probably part of a gang initiation. Jack leaves looking like he wants more to go on, but Will can't help him.

Alana comes by, too, in the afternoon. She looks pale and worried while they talk about nothing. Being bedridden in front of her makes Will feel emasculated, so much so that he can't really enjoy her visit. He brightens when she mentions his dogs and she has the good sense to end her visit on that note.

Hannibal's visits are better because Hannibal brings him delicious food and some kind of juice that's cool and sweet. He couldn't begin to say what it is, but it makes him want to drink more. The food makes him want to eat, too, even though he isn't hungry.

When he's full and sleepy, Hannibal reads to him about fly fishing in Europe and Will thinks that this hospital stay won't be so bad after all. He can't expect Hannibal to visit him constantly, though.

But Hannibal is there again the next morning with breakfast as Will is transferred to a non-critical floor, leaving most of the intrusive equipment behind. The nurses cluck approvingly at how well he's doing because of Hannibal's ministrations. One says he's going to get out of here earlier than he otherwise would, a comment that makes him both hopeful and wary of that hope. Still, that comment makes more bearable the long, slow walk he's made to take with, of all horrible things, one of those walkers with tennis balls on the ends that he can slide as he limps along.

The walk exhausts him. Hannibal has to wake him up for lunch, which isn't as enjoyable because he's so damn tired. He sleeps most of the afternoon, too, something he complains about over dinner with Hannibal.

"They're trying to build your strength so you can leave," Hannibal explains.

Will chews on duck au something or other. It's very tasty. He waits to speak until he swallows, knowing how Hannibal values manners.

"I know. But I don't have to like it."

"Perhaps you would prefer to walk with me," Hannibal suggests.

Will considers it as he forks into his mouth something green he doesn't recognize but that also tastes really good. It compliments the meat. Hannibal always does that with his meals, but Will is only now appreciating it. Hannibal is trying to help him leave, too. He appreciates that more than he'll ever say. He agrees to take another walk on the condition that he can use crutches.

Hannibal makes him wait an hour, but the time passes pleasantly as Hannibal reads to him from a gritty 19th century novel set in Paris. It helps him think of questions to ask Hannibal about Paris, and those questions lead to beautifully worded recollections of the city that make him miss New Orleans. The thought crosses his mind that it would be nice to show Hannibal the city he knows so well, even though he has no idea how to suggest such a thing.

Hannibal helps him get to his feet and he thinks he might actually enjoy a walk. It seems like a very European thing to do, taking a walk after dinner.

He's hardly out of the room before he begins to regret palming one of the two pain pills he got after lunch. He makes it another ten steps before he's sweating in earnest and starting to grunt with pain. He stops and tries not to wobble, his arms taut and shaking as he grips the crutches hard enough to hurt. Hannibal places a steady hand on his back. Will's attention narrows to the all-consuming fire in his leg. Before he knows what's happened, his uninjured leg fails and Hannibal catches him as the crutches clatter to the floor.

Hannibal holds him up while he grits his teeth and breathes through the bursts of pain that reduce the world to his leg.

"They give you a certain dose for a reason," Hannibal says in a tone that's more concerned than chastising. "You took both pills with dinner, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Will breathes. They're working. He'd be howling if they weren't. But they're not enough.

The pain makes him feel like vomiting, something he desperately doesn't want to do. Not when Hannibal has brought him so many good things to eat. It would be an insult and he won't do that to this man who's done so much for him.

He’s relieved when Hannibal eases him into a wheelchair. He doubles over and tries not to strangle the pain out of his leg. They don't want him to touch it at all. He concentrates on breathing instead, his hands balling into fists in his lap. He hears Hannibal ask a nurse for another dose of pain medicine.

“I might puke,” Will says roughly.

He wants to look up at Hannibal so Hannibal can see that he's sorry for this mistake, but he doesn’t need to move his head or open his eyes right now. A plastic bowl is placed in his hand and he grips it tightly.

He stays hunched over and does his best not to claw at his leg as he’s wheeled back to his room. Hannibal has to nearly pick him up to get him back in bed. He wants to curl up on his side but he can’t because of the enormous bandage. Instead, he leans slightly to the side as he clenches his fists and breathes and waits for the pain and nausea to recede.

Enough time passes for him to work up a lather before Hannibal's voice breaks through the gnawing pain to tell him he’s going to get two injections. Hands lift the gown to expose his bare hip and ass. He smells rubbing alcohol; the bite of a needle makes his ass burn like it’s full of angry bees. The drug clouds his mind right away and he forgets that he was ever in pain. He hardly notices the second needle pierce his upper arm.

“This feels... like a lot, Dr. Lecter,” Will slurs, breathing slowly between phrases. “What is it... and how much?”

“Morphine,” Hannibal says and provides a number. The number means nothing to Will, as he tends to avoid narcotics of all kinds, but the drug's name means a great deal.

“You should feel better now,” Hannibal says. It sounds like a question.

“I do,” Will says as he drags his eyes open. “I feel… high. It’s… good.” He studies Hannibal for a moment, the cogs in his mind turning like they're covered with jelly. “Were you… were you trying to get me high?”

Hannibal laughs. Will laughs with him. It feels good to laugh.

“I didn’t have anything to do with what you were given or in what dosage,” Hannibal says. “Your doctor left a standing order on your chart regarding medication for additional pain. But I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Better is an understatement,” Will replies. The opiate has loosened his tongue like a full bottle of whiskey. “I see how people get addicted to this stuff,” he adds, watching Hannibal through half-lidded eyes.

Hannibal studies him. “But you don’t like it.”

“No,” Will barks, more vehement than he means to be. “I mean... it’s good to feel good... but I don’t like what... it does to my head. It's fuzzy. Stupid.”

“Understandable,” Hannibal replies.

Will watches him for a moment. “One of the nurses… told me that you saved my life.”

He sees memories swirl behind Hannibal’s eyes.

“It makes sense,” Will continues. “I thought I was going to die... There was so much blood.”

He pauses and looks up at the ceiling.

“I was ready to die... I was okay with it. It didn’t... feel like giving up... It felt like the easiest... thing to do.”

“Near death experiences always force us to reassess our priorities,” Hannibal replies.

Will nods slightly. “Thank you… for what you did.”

He pauses and searches his memory. “What did you do? Do I even... want to know?”

Hannibal takes a moment to decide. “The paramedics were the real lifesavers,” Hannibal says. “They had surgical clamps I used to stop the bleeding while you were still on the ground.”

“Sounds like… they just had the tools… whereas you had the… knowledge and the skill.” It’s a long sentence and it takes him a few breaths to say. He'd be infuriated if he weren't so euphoric.

Hannibal tilts his head in agreement.

“It must have taken you back… to your days in the ER,” Will observes. “How was that?”

He sees Hannibal choosing his words carefully. “Intense,” he says. “It’s a powerful thing, saving a life. You know that all too well.”

Will nods as his eyes slide shut. Having slept much of the day, he isn’t sleepy or even that tired. But this drug is messing with his mind. He can neither concentrate nor sleep. The terrible limbo is bearable only because he feels so good.

It would be easy to get addicted to this feeling.

Will takes a moment to rewind his thoughts and pick up the thread of the conversation.

“I hope it wasn’t too traumatic for you,” Will says, forcing his eyes open. “I feel like I’ve brought... too much violence into your world. This. Marissa Shuur. Hobbs.”

“It has been traumatic,” Hannibal admits, “but I’m coping with it well.”

Will can tell that he wants to say more. Perhaps he holds back because he thinks Will isn’t ready to hear what he has to say. Or maybe because Will is out of his head.

“Good,” Will says and closes his eyes again. “That’s good.”

“Perhaps we might return to Les Halles,” Hannibal suggests. “The drug may enhance your imagination. Try to picture each detail.”

As Hannibal reads, Will is transported down narrow, trash-strewn streets with the close smells of bad plumbing and unwashed people in elaborate but dirty clothes. The grime and squalor should be repulsive, but he finds himself too curious about these lives half a world and more than a century away to mind their stench. How Hannibal knows that he sometimes enjoys these course, granular details is beyond him. Instead, he lets his imagination run free with each detail until he’s woven a rich, entertaining tapestry.

At length, he can no longer hold the threads together. He falls into a vivid, pleasant dream about himself and Hannibal in Paris.

There's No One Here

Chapter Notes

> Hannibal got sadistic in this chapter. He wanted whump. He got whump-lite. (Anyone have a good whump rec in this fandom?)
>
> The chapter title comes from Björk's "Crying." The chapter itself is indebted to Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal does what a good friend would do and arranges for Will's neighbors and Alana to take turns feeding his dogs while Will convalesces at Hannibal's house. Will agrees reluctantly to go to there instead of to his farmhouse, uncomfortable with the idea but understanding he isn't ready to be on his own yet, no matter how much he prefers solitude.

Now that Will is essentially a captive – and a pained one at that – Hannibal's experiment with Will darkens. Hannibal enjoys spending time with Will in this state more than he'd expected. Will's suffering has been exquisite. Each of his reactions to a new stimulus elicits a spark of interest from Hannibal, even when those reactions are predictable. He didn't expect Will to resist pain medication so much, for example, and although it's now obvious to him that Will is going to have more pain-related mishaps, he anticipates each one with the sort of zest he usually reserves for a fine cut of meat.

The fact that he cares about Will intensifies everything. His control hasn't wavered yet, but he's come close to being caught off balance. Vigilance is more difficult to maintain. However, even if Will does see something, he hasn't been in the right state to analyze properly. Indeed, his vulnerability combined with their new friendship has afforded opportunities beyond Hannibal's expectations.

Will is coming to a physical plateau as well. He'll continue to improve but the small increments will frustrate him. And as Will reaches that plateau, his inflamed brain will throw gasoline on the fire of his imagination and turn this experience into a cluster of horrifying hallucinations and nightmares. The breadth and depth of his terror could not be more delicious.

It's no inconvenience at all, then, to pull the car around for Will when he's discharged from the hospital. He's pale and thinner but he could pass for well enough, though he's rather unfortunately dressed in the sweatpants and hooded sweatshirt Hannibal selected for him from the pedestrian wardrobe in the cheap dresser at his house.

Will wants to protest all the help. Not only is he staunchly independent, he's also sensitive to any hint of deficiency. He remains defensive. The corollaries to a wounded animal are strong.

Given Will's regard for animals, he might consider that a compliment.

Hannibal stays close to Will as he limps slowly inside. Hannibal can see in his tense posture that frustration simmers just beneath the surface, needing only a nudge to boil over. Will's anger is beautiful when it blossoms. Visceral and uncontained. He feels it so deeply and completely. He'd lashed out at the medical staff yesterday after a difficult physical therapy session, a sure sign that he was well enough to leave. Hannibal saw then the echo of Hobbs in him and his fear of becoming the beautiful thing he could be.

Will sits on the bed in the guest room Hannibal has prepared for him. His uncertain expression asks, *What now?*

"You will need to change that daily," Hannibal says, nodding at the bandage hidden under Will's sweatpants. "You should learn how to do it yourself."

Will shrugs. It's close enough to a yes.

"It's best to soak the wound in warm water first to keep it clean and improve circulation," Hannibal adds.

Apprehension flashes in Will's eyes, trained on Hannibal's shoulder.

"You mean take a bath?"

"If you feel able."

Will looks away uncomfortably. Acceptance.

Each of these indignities adds to his annoyance. Hannibal expects that the outpatient clinic he'll visit later today for physical therapy will get an earful from him.

Will lets himself be led to the bathroom where he sits gratefully on the toilet seat. He didn't take both of his pain pills this morning and Hannibal sees that he's starting to hurt again, though he won't admit it yet. The tangle of experiences, motives, and emotions beneath his stoicism captivates Hannibal.

Will reluctantly removes his sweatpants and has to be encouraged to unwrap the bandage. He looks away at the last moment. The nurses mentioned that Will had avoided looking at his leg each time his dressing was changed. Never one to think of himself in positive terms, Will is now even more self-conscious.

He confirms this by looking over Hannibal's shoulder, squirming slightly, and quipping, "I guess I won't look good at the beach this year."

"I understand that it would have been worse if a different gun had been used."

Will's eyes slide over to meet Hannibal's. "Lower velocity," he says and squints. Hannibal can see the sluggishness of his thoughts as he thinks about how Hannibal knows this kind of violence. His eyes widen as he finds the answer. "You must have seen a lot of gunshot wounds."

“More than I care to remember,” Hannibal replies.

Will doesn’t break eye contact for a long moment.

“Will,” Hannibal says, deliberately not looking at the mess that is Will’s leg, “you have to look eventually.”

Will stares at the wall as if to say he doesn’t have to look until he’s good and ready. Then he looks, blanches, and looks away again, his eyes settling on the water filling the tub.

“It’s not easy,” Hannibal says softly, “but you will get used to it.”

When Will glances at him, his eyes are full of so much spite that Hannibal is taken aback and nearly lets his face slip.

Will’s jaw muscles stick out as he clenches his teeth.

Hannibal regains his composure quickly. “If nothing else,” he coaxes, “you need to know what clean, healthy tissue looks like.”

Will’s jaw wavers. When Will glances at him again, sadness has replaced spite.

He sighs and looks down. His face twists with disgust – and with good reason. The sutured flesh sticks up like puckered lips from a mass of angry bruises. It must ache tremendously.

Will swallows heavily. “What am I looking at?”

Will is accustomed to seeing flesh rent and mangled, not repaired, so Hannibal concisely describes the surgery. He shows Will where the sutures from the surgery have already begun to dissolve, then points out which parts of the wound have healed most and which have healed least. He differentiates the primary wound from the tissue damaged by the blast effect and the surgical team’s work.

Will stares at the thin line that runs from the laceration to the hem of his shorts, then looks up at Hannibal. “You did that?”

For a moment, Hannibal is truly taken aback. How could Will know? His surprise slips out and Will sees it and looks at the wall again.

“One of the nurses went into detail about what you did,” Will clarifies.

His eyes flit to Hannibal’s for the briefest moment. Hannibal stands and places a hand on Will’s shoulder.

“Ten to fifteen minutes is enough. Sooner if it becomes painful. Call out if you need a hand.”

Will glances at him again, nods, and finds something else to look at.

Twenty minutes later, Will says through the door that he’s ready. He’s sitting on the toilet seat again, wearing the same pair of shorts, looking wrung out and miserable.

“I have to do this every day?” he grumbles.

“Yes,” Hannibal answers as he sets supplies on the wall of the bathtub. “After physical therapy is preferable.”

“Sounds like torture.”

“Feels like it, too, I imagine,” Hannibal sympathizes. “You’re doing well, though.”

Will eyes him disbelievingly, then glances at the iodine, dressing, and bandage.

“What do I have to do?” he asks tiredly.

Hannibal talks him through the process and soon he has a clumsy but serviceable covering on his leg. That he wordlessly holds a hand out to Hannibal rather than using a crutch to stand speaks not only to how tired he is but also to how comfortable he is with Hannibal.

Hannibal smiles to himself as he helps Will to bed.

A scream wakes Hannibal before dawn. Myriad possibilities spring to mind as Hannibal ties his robe over his pajamas and makes his way to the guest room.

Sweat, blood, and fear waft down the hall.

Will writhes in a loose ball on the hardwood floor, his hands gripping his thigh like a vice. The V of sweat darkening his shirt suggests a nightmare while the crutches leaning untouched against the bed suggest an attempt at sleepwalking. A bright patch of blood on the bandage evinces torn sutures. Will’s groans and hisses and hitched, staccato breaths say the pain hasn’t lessened much since he screamed.

Interesting, Hannibal muses as he goes to the bathroom for a syringe, a vial of morphine, and a suture kit. Will was able to ignore the pain of moving his leg off of the bed and onto the floor: his somnabulent state must have been deep indeed. An instance of the mind overwhelming the brain.

Hannibal draws a sizeable dose of the narcotic, slightly more than Will received in the hospital, and returns to Will’s side. He speaks soothingly to Will, not certain whether Will knows he’s there.

“You’ll be okay,” he says calmly as he places a firm hand on Will’s hip and waits in case Will struggles. He doesn’t, remaining inarticulate as pain devours his world. Each of his well-defined muscles is cable-taut and straining. Complete devastation.

This close to Will, touching him, feeling the totality of his pain in the heat and tremble of his body – Hannibal is awe-struck. He watches, enraptured, as Will trembles and groans and squeezes his leg. He thinks about the incommensurability of pain. Its defiance of imagination. Its inescapability. Will’s pain in this moment is pure and beautiful.

Hannibal has not cared for someone as deeply as he cares for Will in many years, and he has never seen Will in such pain. He savors each tortured gasp. A rare and rarified sensation of sympathy washes over him, as remote from him as Will's pain yet as irrevocably present.

At length, Hannibal slides Will's sweat-damp shorts down to expose his hip, wipes the sweat away with an alcohol pad, and slowly pushes the drug. He has to hold Will's rigid, shaking hip tightly to keep the needle in him. The puncture mark from Will's last shot of morphine is still vividly red against his pale flesh.

Will calms as the tension drains from his body. Gasps and groans turn to whimpers. Whimpers smooth into to shallow, relieved breaths. He cracks his eyes open like he's been reborn into the world.

Hannibal smiles at him as he stops the tiny trickle of blood with a piece of gauze.

Will's cloudy eyes hold questions he doesn't ask.

Hannibal crouches. He drapes Will's arm around his shoulder, slides a hand between Will's chest and his other arm, and pulls him up. He's close to deadweight. Hannibal could pick Will up by himself but he doesn't want Will to know that. Instead, he waits for Will to make an effort to stand before lifting him up with a false noise of exertion. Will gasps when the movement jars his leg. Hannibal puts him down gently and stoops to lift his legs to the bed.

He's completely docile, watching Hannibal through a thick haze of opiate and exhaustion.

"The sutures are torn," Hannibal says with a sympathetic look as he moves a desk lamp to the bed for more light and opens the suture kit.

Will glances down and sees the blood that seeped through the bandage. The hint of color left in his face recedes. He swallows thickly.

"That's what I was dreaming about," he says in a gravelly voice.

"Is that why you tried to get up?" Hannibal asks he cleans the clotting blood from the wound.

"I'm not sure," Will says. "I guess I was sleepwalking. I don't remember."

Hannibal assesses the damage and decides on a mattress stitch.

"You haven't said much about what you do remember."

"That's because I don't want to remember what I remember."

Hannibal glances up meaningfully at Will. Will's eyes acknowledge the fact of his denial but show no desire to stop it. Denial has become his chief coping mechanism.

"It's not good for you to repress this event," Hannibal councils as he ties the first bite.

Will winces and closes his eyes. He isn't squeamish by any means but this is clearly bothering him. Yet another unanticipated but delightful result.

“I’ll get to it in my own time,” Will says tightly.

Clenched fists betray psychological torment. Hannibal wonders what it would take to get Will to tell him what underlies this reaction to getting stitches.

“And you will keep detaching from reality,” Hannibal says. “Hurting yourself.”

Will ignores the last phrase. “I don’t have the best reality right now.”

Hannibal both sees and smells fear on him. He wants to run far away from his trauma. But as with his pain, there is no escape.

“That’s true,” Hannibal says, “but are your dreams any better?”

Will’s eyes open a fraction. “Do you have any suggestions, doctor?” he says in a tone that would be bitterly sarcastic if he weren’t drugged into submission.

“Other than talking about it, no,” Hannibal answers. He finishes the last bite and dresses and bandages the wound.

Will closes his eyes again and says nothing. Hannibal cleans up, covers Will with a blanket, and repairs to the kitchen to start the coffee.

As it percolates, he reviews the incident in real time, storing it in his mind like a video recording. He will return to this feast again and again.

Outside, the birds have begun to chirp.

Chapter End Notes

~~Not sure about the post-Buffet Froid Hannibal in this chapter. Feedback would be much appreciated.~~. Since I've retroactively set this fic after Coquilles instead, I ask that you ignore the continuity errors. Having Will know about Hannibal's past as a trauma surgeon is too integrated into the chapters for me to revise it out.

The Only Thing That's Real

Chapter Summary

Will gets angry. Hannibal has a suggestion.

I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real.

- Nine Inch Nails, "Hurt"

The stag waits for Will in the parking lot behind Hannibal's office. He tosses his enormous head, the hard bone of his antlers pale and shiny in the moonlight. He squares off with Will and snorts aggressively and paws the pavement, his hoof clacking. He doesn't seem out of place in the city but he never seems out of place anywhere. He lowers his head, shakes it once, and raises it again, his dark eyes impenetrable. The ten yards between them is no distance at all.

The hair on the back of Will's neck prickles with electricity as though a thunderstorm will strike at any moment. For the first time since he began dreaming about the animal, Will is genuinely afraid. He can't run, though. He's certain he would be chased and caught. Instead, he holds his ground and bares his teeth. He's an animal. He can intimidate just as well as any deer, however massive it might be.

The stag paws and snorts and grunts, its movements aggressive and oddly predatory. Will can see its breath fog the cold night air. Will growls and shows his teeth again. He is the superior predator – even if, he realizes suddenly, he's naked. Pebbles gouge his feet. The air draws heat out of him. He appears to shimmer in the weak moonlight while the lines of the stag are inviolable.

They face each other as if in a trance for what seems like an interminable interval. They should be circling each other, Will thinks, but he isn't going to initiate movement.

At length the stag's nostrils flare and he raises his head and bellows a bugle like a wolf calling to a pack. Will's spine tingles with a sense that more stags will soon pour into the parking lot.

In response, he yells something incoherent and barely human – and the stag charges, its eyes flashing. It lowers its immense antlers and gores Will's thigh. Will hears a scream. At the same time, he notices that those antlers, in a way that makes sense only in dreams, missed the rest of him.

His leg folds under him and he collapses, still screaming, now clawing at the hot, black blood that spills out of him like it's his own darkness. The stag stands over him. Its menacing

posture conveys absolute power. Its moist breath invades Will's own and it seems to inhale Will's strangled cries as though they're sustenance.

As it leans down and opens its mouth, Will knows it's going to eat him alive.

Then he's clutching the pillow with a death grip, gasping, soaked through with sweat. After a moment of disorientation and terror, the relief of fleeing the nightmare's trap washes over him. His hand brushes his leg of its own accord. The flare of pain makes him groan. He grits his teeth in anger and sits up. Leg be damned, he can't lie here in the sweat-soaked remnants of rising insanity. He must move. If he moves enough, it won't be able to catch him.

He's reckless when he gets up, fighting through the conflagration of pain as he stalks toward the kitchen. He's going to get some water and then pace from room to room until he hurts enough to want to scream. It feels like mid-morning. Hannibal should be at work. If he is and Will is alone, Will intends to howl at full volume until he loses his voice. Then he might punch something if he can find a suitable target. Aggression radiates from him like a force field.

Will stops short when he sees Hannibal at the kitchen island, surrounded by raw ingredients, chopping contentedly. Hannibal glances at him, reads his anger, pain, and frustration with aplomb, and returns to chopping.

Though Hannibal doesn't scrutinize him, Will feels like a madman raving at demons no one else can see. He collapses into a chair and embraces the starburst of pain. Rarely certain whether his sensations exist within him or without, he knows he hasn't imagined this pain. Its tangibility, its obvious cause and cure make it an acceptable companion. It is proof that he's awake and himself and no one else, that he's here and now.

Will barely notices when Hannibal dries his hands and disappears into the back. Time seems not to pass between his glimpse of Hannibal walking away and another glimpse of Hannibal standing in front of him, holding out familiar pills and a glass of juice. Will takes the pills and juice from Hannibal. His vicious, vindictive, smoldering anger is more powerful than fear. It gives him that sensation of being really and truly and fully alive. How easily he could snap and bite and claw right now.

Will sets the pills aside on the butcher's block. He needs his pain.

Hannibal senses his mood and leaves him alone. Good, Will thinks. He could hurt Hannibal right now and it would feel make him feel so good, so powerful, so in control. He grips the glass with unnecessary force and realizes vaguely that his hand – no, his whole body – is shaking. A madman indeed.

Too restless to sit still, Will places the glass on the butcher's block next to the pills and stalks back to his room. He peels the wet shirt off but leaves his shorts on. Not enough patience to change them. If he tried, they'd get stuck on the bandage and he's not sure he'd be able to stop himself from punching the wall. Instead, he grabs the first clean shirt he sees and stalks to the bathroom to pee and wipe the lingering sweat from his body. He avoids his reflection in the mirror. A goddamn lunatic.

As he paces back to the kitchen, he feels the adrenaline ebb and weakness creep in again. No. He isn't ready to feel weak and powerless. He stands stubbornly next to the butcher's block and drinks the juice in vulgar gulps that surely offend Hannibal. He leaves the pills where they are, knowing he'll have to take them soon, but he wants to wait until it's pain, not fear, he can't bear any longer. If only for the change of internal scenery.

He flexes his hands on the grips of the crutches, squeezing and releasing, squeezing and releasing. It's a strangling motion he might one day use.

The sizzle of something cooking in oil catches his attention; the smell of meat makes his stomach growl. He doesn't want to eat, though. Hannibal's calmness irks him. Doesn't he know what it's like to feel desperate? Wretched? Helpless? Enraged?

Will steals a glance. No. Surely not. Whatever goes on behind that mask, it's can't be wild as Will is.

Will turns inward again and seethes and simmers until Hannibal's voice cuts into his anger to tell him lunch is ready. Hannibal's eyes flit to the pain pills on the butcher's block, but Will doesn't need to be told. Pain has overtaken fear and begun to wear him down. He takes the pills and follows Hannibal into the dining room.

A voice in his mind whispers that sweaty shorts and the George Washington University t-shirt Hannibal exhumed from some forgotten corner of Will's wardrobe are not proper attire for Hannibal's dining room, but Will doesn't gave a damn. Hannibal names the food with a formality befitting it, the space, and Hannibal himself, dressed in his usual three-piece suit. Will doesn't so much as acknowledge Hannibal or the meal before he starts eating.

He's acting like a petulant child and he knows it, but his wellspring of guilt and remorse has run dry. Still, he can't stop the appreciative noises that escape as he chews. Hannibal is entirely too good at everything, damn him.

"I hear from Alana that your dogs are doing well," Hannibal says conversationally.

Will glances up. Hannibal's trying to draw him out of his sulk. Of course he is.

"That's good," Will replies without feeling. He's an empty shell of a man now that his anger has receded and the pain medicine has blunted his hurt.

Hannibal arranges risotto on his fork with a care and precision that reminds Will of surgery.

"Perhaps you'd like to see them in the next few days?"

"I would." But he can't put any emotion behind it. Not even for the dogs.

Hannibal glances at him again. Will doesn't realize he's staring at Hannibal's hands. He can't stop thinking about their movements and where they've been. Inside him – inside his leg – pressing down on his ripped veins. Though that happened a week ago, the memories have been coming back to him in his dreams. The cold, hard concrete. Life leaving him. Hannibal's steady presence, his quick work.

And only a few hours ago those hands sewed him back together like he was a ragdoll whose stuffing had burst through a seam. His left hand ventures on its own toward the dressing as he watches Hannibal use his knife to structure more risotto on the fork. The crosshatch movement of knife and fork is just like sewing him up.

“I believe Alana would like to visit you, too,” Hannibal says. “If you feel up to it.”

Will blinks, confused for a moment, then shrugs. “I guess,” he mumbles. He trains his attention on his own plate. He can’t watch those hands any more.

Hannibal lets him eat in silence and Will knows Hannibal's about to get to what he really wants to say. If Will were still angry, he’d lash out. He isn’t in the mood to hear whatever it is Hannibal wants to tell him. The part of him that knows he needs support thinks it’s good that he feels numb.

“What’s bothering you, Will?” Hannibal asks softly.

Will stabs a piece of meat with unnecessary violence.

He feels Hannibal looking at him, watching him in a way that he’d avoided doing earlier. Will doesn’t have to meet his eyes to see the challenge there.

“I worry about your sleepwalking,” Hannibal says. “You could have seriously hurt yourself.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t,” Will growls.

Now Hannibal stares openly at him and *dammit* he doesn’t want to talk about it, doesn’t want to think about, doesn’t want to give a good goddamn about it.

Will avoids Hannibal’s eyes; eventually, Hannibal retreats. The clink and clatter of forks and knives against plates are the only sounds in the room. Belatedly, Will realizes that Hannibal usually has music playing in the background. The pain meds have kicked in fully and unglued his thoughts. He wonders where the music went.

Gradually, guilt nibbles at his defenses and worms its way back in. It’s wrong of him to be so rude to Hannibal.

And so when Hannibal says, “Might I enlist you to dry the dishes?” Will nods in agreement.

He finds himself feeling full and fuzzy, sitting on a stool because he’s a damn gimp, running a dish towel over forks and knives and plates. It’s nice to have something to do with his hands. They’ve missed fly tying and boat motor repair, simple tasks whose demand for precision comforts him greatly. He dries each dish with exact motions and feels the satisfaction of accomplishment as he places each one aside for Hannibal to put away. He needed to do something simple like this more than he realized.

Hannibal turns off the water and dries his hands. “I wonder, Will,” he says, “if you would consider trying hypnotherapy.”

“Hypnosis doesn’t work on me,” Will answers automatically.

“You’ve tried it?” Hannibal asks as he folds the small towel and places it on the counter.

Will concentrates on the concentric circles his hand makes around the plate he’s drying. Smooth motions. A discrete task with a clear endpoint and an unquestionable measure of success.

“Why would I let someone else plant ideas in my mind?”

Hannibal moves to the other side of the butcher’s block so he can face Will. Will refuses to look up.

“Hypnosis is an effective treatment for sleepwalking,” Hannibal says. He picks up the plates and carries them to a cabinet. “Your mind needs to be told what’s real and what isn’t so it can relearn the difference. After a few initial sessions, you can do it by yourself.”

Will rubs circles in a pan like he’s giving the stainless steel a massage. “But I have to let someone else in my head first.”

Hannibal returns to the butcher’s block to collect the silverware and the pan. He pauses, his eyes on Will. “That shouldn’t be a problem if you go to someone you trust.”

Will’s eyes dart to Hannibal. “You want me to let you hypnotize me.”

Hannibal leans forward slightly, his knuckles resting on the block. “I want to try a treatment that’s been proven effective. It upsets me to see you so disturbed when I could be of some help.”

Now Will looks up and locks eyes with Hannibal. Everything about Hannibal’s bearing says *let me help you*. Will strangles the dish towel once and puts it down.

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask,” Hannibal replies, removing the apron he’d donned to wash the dishes. “I have to go. I have an appointment in an hour. I’ll be back to take you to physical therapy.”

“Great.”

He still tires easily, so he limps back to his room and lies down on the side of the bed he didn’t use last night and thinks about Hannibal’s proposition. It scares the hell out of him but it can’t be worse than the slow disintegration of his mind. And he can’t let pain circumscribe his reality forever.

Sleep overcomes him before he makes a decision. He dreams again of the stag goring him and wakes terrified and alone.

Deep Like Rivers

Chapter Summary

Will submits to hypnotism - and gets more than he bargained for.

Chapter Notes

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

- Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

Hannibal suggests that they go to his office to try hypnotherapy. The spatial cues will let Will know he’s in a therapeutic place. Will agrees because he wants to get out of the house.

“Would you prefer a chair or the sofa?”

Will has already settled into his usual chair facing Hannibal.

“Giving me the choice so whatever I choose equates to acceptance of therapy?”

Irritation edges Will's tone. Hannibal, impassive, inclines his head in a yes.

“I’ll stay where I am.”

“Shall I describe the technique?”

“Oh, I’ve been reading about this all night.”

The maniacal cast in Will’s eyes betrays his extreme discomfort.

“Good. You need to be informed about it. Do you have any questions?”

Will shakes his head like a horse bothered by a fly. He stares at Hannibal. Hannibal returns his gaze in the most non-threatening way possible. Will wonders what plan Hannibal has for him.

Hannibal smiles disarmingly. “This won’t work if you aren’t receptive to it.”

Will lifts his hands, palms up, toward Hannibal. “Then make me receptive. That’s what this is all about.”

Hannibal’s lip quirks. “This is about relaxation and suggestion. It is not about making you do anything you do not wish to do.”

Will sniffs derisively, thinking of all the times he’s heard other psychiatrists tell him that. “So relax me.”

Hannibal waits for nearly a minute, eyes on his watch, before he begins. In that time, Will unconsciously mimics Hannibal’s slow, steady breathing and calms considerably. He’s aware that Hannibal means for him to do this; he doesn’t resist.

“Imagine a relaxing place,” Hannibal instructs.

“Do I have to close my eyes?”

“Only if you prefer.”

“I’ll keep them open.”

Hannibal waits again, his eyes on the floor next to Will, until Will calms. Still staring at Hannibal, Will imagines a place he knows well: a stream in the Blue Ridge mountains near Maggie Valley where he’s caught massive brook trout with his homemade flies. He sees himself walking down the trail with his fishing gear at first light and breaking from the path at a spot only he knows. The vibrant plants catch on his waders and the fly rod that sticks up out of his pack as he hikes off-trail through thick underbrush. He ducks under fallen branches. A deer calls in the distance, a bird-like sound. The stream’s subtle babbling grows stronger as he approaches. Forest smells of trees and moss and animals, rich and earthy, calm his mind. Everything is achingly green, pulsating with life. Not even the insects stir in this quiet part of the early morning. At last he reaches a clearing on the bank where big trout swim in a deep pool just downstream from class II rapids.

“What do you see?”

Hannibal’s voice is like the voice of God, coming from nowhere but resounding everywhere.

“A trout stream. A pool where the big trout live. The forest. The old growth trees.”

“Are you alone?”

Will looks around. No one else is here. No animals either. Just him and the water and the trees.

“Yes.”

“What do you hear?”

“The rapids.”

They're fast but consistent. Reliable. Their rush connects to nature and the fish he'll catch. Water runs down mossy rocks and froths where it hits the pool. An eddy swirls on the opposite bank beneath the roots of a massive oak where the best fish are.

"What is the weather like?"

It's a cool mountain morning that promises to turn into a hot summer day. He'll fish here for a few hours, moving up or down stream depending on his luck, and then remove his waders and clothes so he can swim in one of the pools when the midday sun beats down. After that, he'll eat the lunch he brought while he dries in the sun and then maybe take a nap under the immense trees.

"Pleasant."

He wades into the shallow water on his side of the bank. It's cold but he can't feel it through his waders. He assembles his fly rod, checks the line, and begins the motion of the first cast.

"What are you doing?"

"Fishing."

The smooth motion of his arm looses the line in a perfect arc.

"How do you feel?"

"Good."

Standing ankle-deep in the water, he knows he's really in Hannibal's office and not here watching the fly land gracefully on the nearly still surface of the pool, but he doesn't much care. He cares only that he'll spend the next few hours doing this and nothing else.

"You are relaxed. We can begin."

Will listens as he reels the line and begins the next cast. The neon green line catches the light of the new sun and shimmers in the air. He hears the birds wake up and begin talking to each other. A few insects buzz lazily around his head.

A long time seems to pass. He replaces the black number 8 zebra midge with a golden number 6 nymph with vermillion accents. A brook trout hits and he jerks the line, shouting with satisfaction when the hook sets in the fish's mouth. He reels it in eagerly. First fish of the season. He nets it and measures it only to find that it's an inch under the size limit.

The brown fish wriggles in his hands, its wide mouth gaping in the terrible oxygen as Will removes the hook. He runs his wet fingers lightly along its handsome marbled back and admires the blue haloes around small red dots that form large blue stripes on its flanks. It's a beautiful fish. He's sad to let it go but the day is young and he has plenty of time to catch fish big enough to keep. He bends at the waist and holds the fish carefully in the water with both hands, keeping it upright, until it has its bearings and darts away.

"When you sleepwalk, where are you going?"

The voice of God. Will checks the hook and gathers line to begin his next cast.

“I don’t know. Or I don’t remember. I’m not sure which.”

Sunlight dapples the water, casting shadows in its swirling columns. The air is sweet and clear. A fish hits top water near his fly and he sees a flash of mottled yellow and black before it disappears.

“Are you alone when you sleepwalk?”

“Sometimes. Winston was with me once.”

A hawk screams overhead. He looks up but can’t make it out through the thick layers of poplar, oak, and beech. Sunlight filters down and warms his face. He closes his eyes and basks.

“Who else is with you?”

When he opens his eyes, the stag stands on the opposite bank half-hidden in bushes of honeysuckle. He doesn’t remember seeing honeysuckle on that bank, but its smell drifts over to him and he inhales deeply and remembers Louisiana and Mississippi. The stag stares. Was it this stag he heard calling earlier?

“Will? Who else is with you when you sleepwalk?”

“No one.”

The stag shakes its head and grunts, and Will is overcome with the urge to cross the stream and touch it. He reels the line in and lays the fly rod in a patch of Virginia creeper. The stream is more than twenty yards wide with a quick drop-off at the five yard mark. The pool may be more than six feet deep. He’ll have to wade part of the way and swim the rest, but it’s hot now and the cold water will feel good. Pebbles and sediment swirl under his feet as he begins crossing the shallow bar on his side.

“Will? Where are you now?”

The voice is distant and easy to ignore. The stag’s bottomless eyes watch him advance. The black feathers on its rump rustle though not a breath of wind stirs. He hears the hawk scream again and looks up. He can see it now that he’s out from under the canopy. It wheels overhead, not far from the tree line. A red-tailed hawk. But the feathers on the stag are raven’s feathers, sleek and black.

“Will?”

It’s not the stag speaking or the hawk. Who is it? It doesn’t matter. What matters is touching those improbable feathers where the stag’s tail should be. Pebbles give way under his feet as the water rises. The stag seems farther away than it was earlier and the sun is beating down on him now that he's nearing the middle of the stream.

“Can you hear me? Will?”

Yes, he wants to say to the stag, *I can hear you*. *I'm coming*. Sweat runs into his eyes. He wipes it away with the sleeve of his shirt but the material is so hot that it burns his forehead. He yelps. His waders feel like they're made of lead as he works his way through the waist-deep water. He still isn't halfway there yet. The stag looks on impassively.

"Will!"

The rocks under his feet are slippery. The current makes every step more difficult than the last. He's covered with sweat like he's already gone for a swim but it doesn't cool him. Lactic acid burns his legs. If he's not careful, he'll be swept away. He keeps his arms out for balance as he inches forward, feeling for each new rock before taking a step. He's going to flood his waders any moment now and then he'll have to swim frantically for the bank and the stag. He chooses a cluster of beech roots just downstream from the stag and decides he'll swim for them.

He hears his name from the opposite bank, but it's receded so far from him that it may as well be in Tennessee. Who's calling him? He squints in the brutal noon sun. It's not the stag. The stag still watches silently. Yellow and white honeysuckle hides its legs. Suddenly, he's sure it will bolt if he doesn't reach it soon. The water clutches at him like a living thing, threatening to pull him under. He inches forward still, waiting to swim until the last possible moment. The current is too quick. He'll have to swim fast to catch the roots.

Sweat runs into his eyes again. He blinks rapidly at the sting of salt and runs a refreshingly cool hand over his eyes until he can see. When he locates the stag, he's shocked to see that it's melting. Water runs down its antlers, taking little pieces of them with it. Its dark flanks trickle away; the feathers are damp and wilted.

With a shout, Will pushes himself forward and swims mightily as the current carries him downstream. He can see the stag melting into the honeysuckle, blackening it like the stag is made of tar, but the stag's eyes remain fixed on his. His heart pounds in his ears. The water isn't cold now. It's not just hot but close to boiling. He's going to be cooked in this stream if he can't reach the roots soon, but they're so far away. He can hardly see them as he flings his arms overhead and kicks his legs in the best forward crawl he can manage.

A wave covers his head. When he breaks the surface, muddy, choppy water, choked with silt from a thousand tributaries, fills his nose with river stink. He stops swimming and looks around. Shore stretches out far away on both sides. He can see a bridge nearly a mile away and knows it's Greenville and that he's in the middle of the Mississippi River. Swimming in this river means a sure death by whirlpool or undertow or barge. Dad told him all his life never to swim in the river. Never. His blood roars as he tries not to panic.

He doesn't remember why he's here in the silt-choked water with the sun's relentless heat pummeling him. He sees a tugboat steaming a hundred yards downstream and waves and tries to yell for help, but he can barely keep his head above water. The current carries him farther from the bridge. Where is the next bridge? Vicksburg? How many river miles is that? How long can he tread water? How long can he avoid the barges? When will a whirlpool drag him under?

The water begins to bubble around him and he realizes he won't drown. He'll boil.

Will kicks and flails. Water scalds his mouth when he tries to scream. He screams again and again, hoping someone will hear him and fish him out of this roiling hell. His strength is fading. He's melting into the river. He tries to kick but his legs liquefy. He lifts his hand out of the water and watches with horror as his fingers become mud and then muddy water and run down his arm. He screams and screams and screams until his screams turn to water, too, and silt fills his lungs as he tumbles into deep, thick, tarry darkness.

Heart Cooks Brain

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up to a tough time. Hannibal comforts him.

Chapter Notes

This is going to get slashy, probably sentimental, and possibly romantic because I need to lick the wounds caused by the last few episodes.

Chapter title by Modest Mouse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vast blue sky and vivid green trees greet Will when he opens his eyes. A hawk – the same hawk? – wheels in the endless expanse. Only the chill that's worked its way through Will's skin and muscles and into his very bones overshadows his awe.

He shivers pitifully and realizes he's lying on his back in about six inches of water: the shallow part of the trout stream. The last thing he remembers is the terror of boiling alive in the Mississippi River. He shudders. The dream was so real.

How did he get back here? Why is he lying in the stream?

Everything is slightly uncanny. Even the water that trickles around his head and shoulders as gravity carries it toward the sea seems strange. He wonders what the hell he's doing here. It doesn't seem like summer, yet each summer he visits this stream to get away from people.

The stag. It holds the answer. He wants to turn his head to see if the stag is still there or if the tar it melted into coats the honeysuckle. He'd get up – he's freezing in this icy water – but his arms and legs aren't working. He's locked in place.

He should panic. He should fight. He's a fighter.

But he can't. Or… won't?

That can't be right. He's fought all his life; he won't stop fighting now.

Yet he lies in the stream for a long time and shivers and wishes he were warm enough to sleep. Cheery blue sky gives way to a white-grey mix of clouds. Wind rustles the leaves. The

sky becomes so painfully white that he doesn't notice the snowflakes falling until they land on his cheeks and eyelashes.

He hears cracking to his right where the deep water is and knows ice is forming. The gentle babble of the rapids ceases. His shivers intensify as water solidifies around him but still he can't move.

Will's mind drifts to his first winter on Lake Erie. He hadn't had the right clothes for the onslaught of wind and lake effect snow, and he was unfamiliar enough with the weather patterns that he got caught in a blizzard on his six mile walk home from school. The cracked, weed-choked sidewalk littered with beer cans, cigarette butts, and used condoms disappeared under a blanket of white so quickly that he had no choice but to run to the nearest structure for shelter. An abandoned warehouse: it stank of urine and shit and unwashed people. Will averted his eyes from the dingy brown piles of homeless people, most of them hung over or junk sick. He was almost entirely on his own at that point since dad was usually drunk when he was home at all. Shivering in his frayed jacket, Will was close enough to being one of those miserable masses himself; he didn't need to empathize with them. He distracted himself by watching the wind blow whorls of snow in through windows broken over many years by thrown rocks or baseballs or fists.

When the blizzard subsided enough for him to flee what seemed then to be his future – his destiny, even – Will trudged through the knee-deep snow back to the road. Piles of dirty snow kicked up by snowplows covered the sidewalk, so he walked in the road, shivering, and tried to keep track of time and snowfall by paying attention to how deep his tracks were. But his attention wandered like drifting snow.

He stumbled along, feeling oddly but pleasantly warm inside until a siren startled him. A cop got out of the passenger's side of the cruiser and asked him what he was doing out by himself in the blizzard. He had no answer. He was immeasurably grateful for the shock blanket the other cop draped over his shoulders and then for the warmth of the backseat and the thermos top of hot coffee – grateful enough not to lie about his address. Once inside the small apartment, he pulled off all of his clothes, leaving a trail of steaming cotton from the front door to his bedroom, piled as many extra blankets as he could find on his bed, then burrowed under them and slept for a day. He was sick for a week.

Lying in the ice of the now-frozen trout stream, he remembers most vividly the moment when he stopped shivering and started to feel warm inside. It happened not long after he left the warehouse. He'd had such a hard time picking his feet up at that point. He thought about taking a break to conserve his energy when the siren made him leap out of his skin.

He thinks about that now, his muscles shaking in the ice. When will this hypothermia turn to warmth?

He's going to die here. That thought causes no anxiety as the snowflakes turn fat and wet where they fall on his face. If he could move his head to look at his body, he imagines he'd see nothing but blinding white. It's a peaceful death, like going into shock as he bled out in the parking lot behind Hannibal's office.

Will blinks at a particularly heavy snowflake and the sky tilts and jumps and hisses like static on an old television set. The sky becomes white marble with metal protruding from it and – *is that*, he blinks, *is that a shower head*?

Everything is blurry.

He hears breathing nearby and sees the outline of a hand wringing water out of a bath cloth over his chest. Will shivers as the frigid drops hit his sternum and run down into the cold water covering his stomach. He blinks heavily and, with great effort, shifts his eyes to the right.

“Dr. Lecter?” His thick tongue trips over the syllables.

Hannibal is wearing the burgundy shirt and deep purple vest Will had seen him in this morning at breakfast. His forearms are wet where he’s rolled up the sleeves. He’s on his knees next to the bathtub. The sight sends a jolt of something electric and complicated through Will, but he’s so cold that it barely registers. The light is too bright where it reflects off the marble. Will closes his eyes.

“‘m cold.”

Hannibal’s hand comes to rest against his forehead. Will shifts into the gentle touch.

“The water is warm. It feels cold because you have a fever.”

His voice is soft and intimate in the small space.

“That makes sense,” Will mumbles. As in the dream, he can’t move though he wants very badly to escape the cold. “Can I get out?”

“Yes.”

Will feels Hannibal moving near him. Hannibal’s hand brushes his ankle as he pulls the drain plug. When Will can focus again, he sees Hannibal look at him as though he isn’t sure Will is fully cognizant yet. The muscles attached to his eyes shift as he searches Hannibal’s face. His eyelids flutter and a mélange of trout stream, Mississippi River, and Lake Erie plays in his head.

When he opens his eyes again, Hannibal is still watching him. Probably it’s been only a moment. Will sees something in Hannibal’s eyes he’s not seen before – something equally electric and complicated. He doesn’t know what it is, but he’s going to return to it when he no longer feels like he’s going to freeze to death.

He blinks and looks down and realizes to his great chagrin that he's completely naked.

“You couldn’t leave me in my shorts?”

“You would have had to remove them eventually.”

Will raises his eyebrows a fraction in acknowledgement. He's not nearly as bothered as he should be by Hannibal not only seeing him naked but having also undressed him. Hannibal is a doctor. And besides that, Hannibal's had his fingers inside Will, clamped to the artery in his leg so he wouldn't bleed to death. After that, being naked in front of the man seems like a non-issue.

Hannibal, apparently convinced Will is awake, moves to crouch next to Will's shoulder. Will lifts a clumsy arm and reaches for that handsome fabric. The shirt looks good on him, something about the dark shade and his complexion that Will intuits rather than knows. Hannibal's shoulders are blessedly warm under Will's frigid arm. Hannibal takes Will's hand and secures his arm around his shoulder, the slowly lifts Will up and onto the towel-covered toilet seat. Carefully he moves Will's injured leg over the wall of the tub. A trickle of blood mixes with rivulets of water that run down the side of his leg to drip on the floor. Fascinated, Will wants to touch it, to put his finger to his mouth and taste his own blood, proof that he's alive.

Will leans forward and rests his elbow on his right leg so he can hold his head, suddenly too heavy for his neck. Hannibal drapes a towel over his shoulders; he shivers as it traps his body heat and warms him.

Another towel brushes against his good leg and then his bad leg. The gentle friction creates warmth and soon he can take deeper breaths instead of the shallow half-gasps imposed by the cold. He sighs at the tremendous relief of warmth.

Everything is still a little blurry as Hannibal offers him a towel so he can dry his front. Painstakingly, he does, starting with his chest and working down while Hannibal rubs the other towel across his back. Hannibal's strong hands feel like the best kind of security.

"What happened?" Will mumbles.

Hannibal offers him a t-shirt, another relic from graduate school (where does he find them?). Will slides his heavy arms in and slowly pulls the shirt over his wet head. Hannibal still looks worried as he drapes yet another towel over Will's head and begins gently drying his hair.

"You spiked a fever. I noticed when you stopped responding to my questions. Before I could try to reach you, you had a mild seizure. You woke up long enough for me to ascertain that it was both a seizure and a mild one. Do you remember that?"

From beneath the towel Hannibal is rubbing over his hair, Will expels a sigh with a "No" at the end.

"I thought not. Amnesia is common with seizures."

"Did you carry me here?"

Hannibal pulls the towel away and offers Will a comb. He meets Will's half-lidded eyes briefly. "Yes."

Will's eyebrows jump even as his eyelids flutter again. "I'm impressed."

One side of Hannibal's mouth quirks. Will's lips respond in kind.

Hannibal offers Will a clean pair of shorts, which Will stares at stupidly for a few beats. Hannibal's mouth quirks again as he lifts Will's feet and slips them into the shorts. Will is too tired and sick to feel embarrassed or angry over Hannibal dressing him like he's a Ken doll. Hannibal slides his feet into a pair of pajama pants and lifts both garments to his knees. Will grabs a handful of them as Hannibal helps him stand again.

"Just the underwear."

Will doesn't understand why, but he complies, pulling the shorts up around his hips. Hannibal lowers him back down and reaches for gauze. Right. His damn leg. He stares at it through drooping lids. The outer bruises are yellow around the edges but the big bruise around the wound itself is still dark with damaged vessels. The pain is remote, like it belongs to someone else. He watches Hannibal dry, clean, dress, and bandage the wound with an economy of movement that evinces great skill as well as considerable practice.

Something is wrong with him and it doesn't have anything to do with his leg. But maybe it has something to do with his hallucinations. That thought skims the surface of his mind and bounces off into empty space.

Soon, Hannibal helps him stand again and he's fully occupied with the task of pulling his own pajama pants up. Hannibal's arm travels down to Will's waist and they slowly negotiate the bathroom and the hallway to reach Will's room. By the time he's settled in bed, Will is uncomfortably warm and covered in a light sheen of sweat. He's just with it enough to be worried by the drastic temperature change. A seizure, too, Hannibal said. Shit.

"Not that I want to go back, but should I be in the hospital?"

"If you hadn't come around when you did, you'd be there now."

Hannibal holds out a glass of water. Will drinks greedily, unaware until the first swallow of how desperately thirsty he is. He spills some on his shirt and Hannibal tells him to slow down. Will doesn't listen, instead draining the glass so quickly he gasps for air when he's done. He gives Hannibal the empty glass and lies back down, intending to stay still until the heaviness in his bones goes away.

Hannibal's hand on his temple catches his attention, but Hannibal holds him still so he can't look over questioningly. The feel of something hard and plastic in his ear gives him the clue he needs.

"What's wrong with me?"

"I don't know yet. I doubt it's related to your injury. I'll take some blood momentarily."

"Vampire."

Will can hear Hannibal's smirk. He'd smirk himself but moving anything is beyond him. The thermometer and Hannibal's hand go away, leaving Will feeling simultaneously leaden and

amorphous, at once anchored and spilling over his boundaries.

“I’m afraid I jostled your leg more than I intended when I moved you,” Hannibal says. “How is it?”

“Not bad.”

Will hears the rattle of pills and isn’t sure he gave the words enough air and shape to come out intelligibly. He opens his eyes a fraction. “I said not bad.”

Hannibal’s sideways glance is guarded and somewhat disbelieving. “Your temperature hasn’t come down enough. These contain a fever reducer as well as something for pain. I won’t force you to take them, but you have a tendency to let pain overcome you as though you deserve to hurt.”

Hannibal’s eyes bore into his. Will’s pulse quickens as his own eyes widen.

“Will. You don’t deserve to hurt.”

Will’s chest constricts and suddenly it’s very hard to breathe. Hannibal’s expression is soft and sincere. No one has ever looked at Will quite like that. He wants to look away, knowing his eyes are betraying him, but he can’t.

Will offers the tiniest nod. When Hannibal touches him again, the zap of electricity returns and mingles with the flutter of emotion trying to beat its way out of his ribcage. God, Hannibal’s hands are so warm and strong and true.

A noise of effort escapes him as Hannibal helps him up so he can take the pills. Hannibal shifts a knee over to join his arm in supporting Will and something about that gesture and everything else sets off waves of emotion inside. He fights, wanting to turn away, wanting Hannibal to leave so he can bury his face in the pillow. But Hannibal holds him in place and anyway, he doesn’t have the strength to move.

Hannibal’s hand brushes reassuringly against Will’s shoulder and before Will knows what he’s doing, he turns his face into Hannibal’s chest and the tears brimming in his eyes spill over and wet the wine-colored fabric. He claws without meaning to at Hannibal’s back, taking a fistful of expensive shirt.

Everything that hurts pours out of him as he chokes on sobs that break over the solid fact of Hannibal beneath him. He can feel Hannibal’s heart beating calmly in his chest. Will focuses on that sound as he chokes and hiccups.

Hannibal’s free hand tangles in his still-drying hair and he presses his lips against Will’s curls. The hurt expands and deepens like the trout stream turning to the Mississippi River. Will tries to fight it. His hands tighten around Hannibal’s shirt. Hannibal turns his head so his cheek rests against the crown of Will’s head. He murmurs something that makes his chest rumble and the levee holding back the swollen river of pain inside Will bursts.

Hannibal's hand rubs firm, soothing circles over Will's shaking, hitching back. The world narrows to Hannibal's heartbeat and breathing and warmth for a very long time.

When Hannibal finally shifts to lay Will down, Will is too exhausted to move. Hannibal's hand on his cheek feels fundamentally good. It's as though he finally has something only he seemed to lack. As sleep rises to claim him, Will feels whole and safe and loved.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter owes a great debt to chapters 5 and 6 of *Hyacinth House* by bluesyturtle, *il miglior fabbro*.

Fire

Chapter Summary

Hannibal discovers the pull of Will's gravity. Will discovers a case.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from R.E.M.'s "The One I Love."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sickly sweet smell of fever overpowers Hannibal when he checks on Will once his afternoon appointments are over. Sleeping like Hannibal left him a few hours ago. Nothing is out of place to indicate he's gotten up, though the twisted sheets show he's been tossing and turning. His shirt is tangled around his arm and the IV line Hannibal started earlier to treat his dehydration.

Will shifts restlessly when Hannibal untangles the shirt. Fever burns high in his cheeks, giving his skin the only color it has. With the sheen of sweat covering it, it's not just pasty but nearly translucent, like a cooked onion. The map of veins and arteries is more visible than usual; Hannibal's pulse quickens.

Will's eyes shuttle beneath half-closed lids as Hannibal disconnects the line and slips the shirt free. His hands linger for a moment on Will's overheated arm. Will mutters something unintelligible and gasps.

"Will? Are you awake?"

He shakes his head and clutches the sheets. "No," he murmurs in a small, frightened voice.

Hannibal wonders what sort of hellish dreamscape flares in the inflamed world behind his eyelids. He reconnects the line and brushes Will's wet hair from his forehead.

"You're okay, Will," he says soothingly. "You're safe."

A noise of absolute anguish escapes Will's lips. Hannibal bends down to kiss his forehead.

"You're safe," he repeats, whispering the words into Will's ear.

An hour later, as Hannibal is planning dinner, Will emerges from the hallway, limping along with great effort. Sweat already rings the collar of the dry shirt he's put on. Though plain

white, it looks colorful next to his sick skin, sallow save for the cherry burn in his cheeks. His arms shake with the effort of supporting his weight on the crutches as he crosses to the armchair.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed,” Hannibal admonishes from the kitchen island.

“Probably not,” Will concedes in a low, gravelly voice. He collapses into the chair and grunts at the pain his uncontrolled movement causes, then leans the crutches against the chair and lifts his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face.

The metallic scent of blood cuts the sweet haze of fever like a knife. Tasting the air for its bitter, coppery notes, Hannibal traces the scent to a line of blood that’s run down Will’s arm where he ripped the IV out.

“You could have called me,” Hannibal says as he rounds the kitchen island with a damp towel.

“It was like that when I woke up,” Will says wearily, scrutinizing his arm as if it belongs to someone else. “I think I pulled it out when I was dreaming.” He watches Hannibal wipe the blood from his arm. “I didn’t notice it started again.”

His eyes shift to the floor from Hannibal’s immaculate apron as though he’d sully it just by looking. “It got on the sheets,” he confesses.

Hannibal’s face softens. He cautiously lifts a hand to Will’s cheek. Still too warm, but Hannibal didn’t need to touch him to know that. He wants to see the look in Will’s eyes.

There. A kernel of desire wrapped in apprehension.

Hannibal smiles. “Could I get you to eat something?”

Will’s eyes say *yes* before he nods, though Hannibal can see that he’s not hungry. Will thinks he should try: that’s what matters.

Hannibal pulls back. “Don’t worry about the sheets, Will,” he says as he goes to the sink to wash his hands. “Do put some pressure on that.”

Will blinks in confusion before he realizes what Hannibal is talking about. His hand moves clumsily to press down on the towel. Hannibal studies him surreptitously. The fever has sapped him of what little strength he’d built up over the past few days. If it doesn’t break by tomorrow afternoon, Hannibal will have to give serious consideration to treating the underlying cause just long enough to break it.

He brings Will a glass of the same agua fresca Will so enjoyed when he was in the hospital. Will takes a hesitant drink. So much like his dogs in matters of sustenance, once Will is sure it’s both his and good, he gulps half the glass as though someone will try to take it from him.

Will’s attention drifts to his arm. The bleeding has stopped; he looks instead at another pinprick of a wound.

“Did you take some blood?”

“Yes,” Hannibal replies, kneading dough for biscuits. “Preliminary results point to an infection.”

“Preliminary results,” Will echoes distantly.

Hannibal pats the dough until it’s half an inch thick and cuts rounds with a twist of his wrist. “Some cultures take time to grow.”

Will stares at his arm, his eyes bright and unfocused. Hannibal wonders what tricks his feverish mind plays on him now. Perhaps his arm necrotizes in front of him. Perhaps it becomes the arm of one of the many corpses Will studies. There is no end to the violence and horror Will’s mind can conjure.

Hannibal puts the biscuits in the oven and sets two pans on the stove for sausage gravy and bacon. Will prefers these two dishes, and though they don’t contain the best nutrition for him, he’s more likely to eat them than pick at them.

“You said I had a seizure this morning.” Will still stares at his arm, his voice vacant.

“A mild one,” Hannibal answers as he adds sausage to one pan and layers strips of bacon in the other.

“Related to the fever?”

“Almost certainly.”

The bacon and sausage begin to sizzle and supplant the sweet smell of fever with the savory scent of meat.

“Could it… could it also be related to the sleepwalking, the hallucinations?”

“It’s possible.”

Will hasn’t stopped staring at his arm.

“Are you hallucinating now, Will?” Hannibal asks quietly.

Several seconds pass before Will answers.

“Yes.”

The fat at the ends of the bacon strips begins to shrink into the heat. The healthy pink sausage, seasoned with sage, thyme, black pepper, and salt, alchemizes into beige.

“What do you see?”

Sweat rolls down Will’s face. He blinks when it gets in his eyes and wipes his face distractedly with the towel.

“My arm.”

The fat is layered just right in this batch of bacon. Hannibal pours some of the bacon grease into the sausage as it browns, then adds milk and flour.

“Your arm?”

Will turns his arm over, utterly fascinated by what he sees.

He’s remarkably calm when he speaks. “It’s… the skin is… it’s boiling. I can smell it.”

The bacon hisses and spits. Hannibal imagines that it’s Will’s flesh cooking in the pan. His mouth waters beyond his ability to control it.

“What does it smell like?”

“It smells… good. Really good. Like breakfast.”

“Like sausage and bacon?” Hannibal flips the strips of bacon in the pan and stirs the sausage gravy.

“Yeah.”

Hannibal tears his eyes from the cooked bacon, swallows the saliva in his mouth, and takes a deep breath, glad that Will isn’t capable of noticing him. He wipes his hands and turns the heat down on the gravy. He removes the biscuits from the oven and sets them aside to cool, then crosses to Will.

Will looks up at him with bright, fiery eyes. Hannibal crouches in front of him and takes his hand, the hand he thinks is boiling. Will watches, his eyes wide, as Hannibal runs his fingers slowly down Will’s arm to the elbow and back up. Will’s eyes roll back in his head and he begins to hyperventilate. His eyelids flutter. It’s difficult to tell if he’s seizing again or just transitioning from one mode of perception to another.

Hannibal counts silently, still holding Will’s arm. At twelve, Will takes a deep breath and opens his eyes. He’s disoriented but present; his pupils react equally to the light in the room: no obvious physical damage. Will's disorientation turns quickly to relief and just as quickly bleeds into terror.

Hannibal places a palm on his cheek again. Will’s face twists; twin tears break free and mix with the little rivers of sweat pulled by gravity to the delta of his mouth. Hannibal thumbs away one and then the other. Ashamed, Will looks at the floor, breathing shakily.

“Jesus,” he curses, “how many times am I going to cry in front of you?”

“You’ve been through a great deal lately,” Hannibal says softly, his eyes on Will in a silent plea for Will to look at him again. “I would be worried if you weren’t expressing your emotions.”

Hannibal releases Will’s hand and Will rubs his eyes.

“My emotions.” His voice trembles. “My emotions are all over the place.”

“You feel like you have no control?”

At that, Will’s scared eyes join with Hannibal’s again. He searches Hannibal’s eyes for something to trust. More tears run down his face as he nods.

Hannibal takes Will’s hand again. “I’ll help you regain that control.”

Will’s smile is tentative at first, then so desperate that it no longer resembles a smile but instead a distorted grimace. Hannibal smiles back at him and gently dabs his cheeks to catch the tears and sweat. Will’s eyes widen and Hannibal sees the kernel of desire again. Hannibal drops his mask just enough for Will to see desire in his eyes, too. Will’s pupils dilate and he sucks in a breath that isn’t full of pain and fear. Hannibal adds his other hand to Will’s, pulls it gently towards him, and places a chaste kiss on the knuckle, cataloging the changes in Will’s scent now that he’s seen his desire reciprocated. Will’s desire has the umami scent of earth and rain, essential and wholesome and satisfying. Hannibal lingers half as long as he’d like, then stands and returns to the stove.

“I’m afraid the meal I’m making contributed to your hallucination.”

A shaking mass of raw emotion, Will is grateful for the subject change. “Smells good,” he murmurs.

Hannibal rewards him with a smile as he ladles gravy over biscuits in two bowls. He tamps down his fetish for artful presentation and places slices of bacon in the bowls so they’re one quarter buried in the gravy. He can’t help adding a sprig of parsley and a few shakes of cayenne pepper to each bowl for color.

Hannibal retrieves a folding tray that will rest above Will’s lap without hurting his leg. He refills Will’s glass of agua fresca and pours one for himself, then perches on a stool next to Will and announces the particulars of the bacon and sausage.

Will starts with the bacon, shoving a full piece into his mouth. Hannibal is glad to see him eat with such appetite. As much as he enjoys watching what Will’s illness does to him, Will is ultimately more interesting to him well than sick. Now that he’s seen and scented Will’s desire, he’s even more eager to help Will heal so they can explore that uncharted terrain. Will can be so much more than he is now. Hannibal intends to help him see that.

“This is really good,” Will says as he eagerly slices one of the biscuits. His bowl is already half-empty. “How is everything you make always so good?”

“Fresh ingredients,” Hannibal answers. “Nothing I make is out of your reach.”

Will tilts his head doubtfully. Then, to Hannibal’s great surprise, a mischievous gleam appears in his eyes. “Maybe I like you cooking for me.”

Hannibal is knocked off balance again, but this time Will is watching. Will smiles at Hannibal’s reaction. He slices another piece of biscuit as though it’s a prize he’s won and

chews like he knows he's being watched. Hannibal files the exchange under *fascinating things Will Graham does*. It would be easy to close the two feet of space between them and plant a kiss on those bright red lips. It's what Will wants.

The time is wrong, though, so Hannibal merely lets Will see that his interest is returned in equal measure. He made this simple meal for Will, not himself, but the salty, savory flavor of the bacon compliments the moment.

Hannibal waits until Will's bowl is empty to speak again. "One never tires of an appreciative audience."

"Is that why you like giving dinner parties?"

Hannibal glances at Will. Will's eyes shine as though he's had too much to drink. Will Graham is flirting with him.

Hannibal has to stop himself from staring openly. He had supposed Will would be playful in this situation when, after meeting Will, he'd calculated all of Will's potential responses to various stimuli under various conditions. But to be the cause of that playfulness as well as its object feels so different, strange, and new. He hadn't included his own reaction in the calculus.

"That's one reason," Hannibal says at length, just able to keep the strain out of his voice.

"Are there others?"

Between the full meal, the fever, and the interrupted sleep he's gotten, Will should be nodding off. But he isn't. He's lustful. Primal. Showing parts of himself he would never show if he weren't out of his head.

This is moving too quickly.

Hannibal takes the tray from him and changes tactics.

"I'm going to change the sheets. Would you like your laptop?"

Will, whose head had drooped in the minute he was left alone, blinks up at him. "Yes, actually."

Tired though he is, Will doesn't disappoint him. When Hannibal returns to the kitchen, Will is engrossed in *TattleCrime.com*. His eyes are sharp and aware when he glances up.

"Jack Crawford hasn't been trying to contact me, has he?"

"What makes you say that?"

Will points to the screen and waits for Hannibal lean down and look at it with him. A garish photo of a bloated corpse occupies most of the screen.

“This ‘Sugar Sheriff’ – Freddie Lounds really phoned that one in, didn’t she? – three bodies in the past twelve days. Targeting diabetics. Signature mutilation. He takes fingers, toes. A foot in the third one. He’s escalating. Seems like something Jack would call about.”

Hannibal pulls back. “He did call. After lunch. He wants you to look at the case.”

Will’s eyes cloud over with rage. “You were going to tell me this when?”

Hannibal meets Will’s anger with cool detachment. “When you’re capable of looking at it, Will.”

Will laughs bitterly. “You think I’m not capable now?”

Hannibal looks at him doubtfully.

Will rolls eyes. “Okay, maybe not now,” he concedes. “But tomorrow. I’ll get some more sleep. You’ll figure out whatever’s causing this.”

Hannibal leans down again. “Will. You look at this before you’re ready and your nightmares will get worse, you might try sleepwalking again. You had a hallucination – an intense one – less than an hour ago. I can’t in good conscience let you do this.”

Will looks away unhappily, his jaw working. He knows Hannibal is right.

“I guess I should go back to bed, then,” Will says. He hands the laptop to Hannibal and reaches for his crutches when Hannibal’s hand on his arm stops him. Will flushes, suddenly shy when he realizes that Hannibal helping him to bed means close contact. He holds his arm out nonetheless.

He’s a furnace burning himself out when Hannibal lifts him up. The umami scent of his desire is stronger, like a perfectly aged prosciutto. Hannibal reacts to the scent and the heat of Will’s body more strongly than he’d anticipated. By the time they make it to the guest room, Hannibal is out of breath and uncomfortably warm.

Will slumps like a puppet with his strings cut as soon as he makes contact with the bed. He watches through hooded eyes as Hannibal arranges his limbs so he’ll sleep comfortably. For once, he doesn’t protest when presented with pain medicine and an additional anti-pyretic. He doesn’t fight sleep, either, falling into it so quickly that Hannibal accidentally wakes him up while reconnecting the IV line.

Will’s eyes smolder in spite of his exhaustion. His lips part and he looks very much like he wants a kiss. Hannibal brushes wet strands of hair from his forehead instead, his fingers pausing as he feels Will’s pulse hammer near his temple. Will’s eyes slide shut and contentment appears on his face before it slackens.

“Sleep well,” Hannibal murmurs as he pulls hesitantly away from the strange, delightful creature that is Will Graham.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! I have a Tumblr now. solitarythrush.tumblr.com Chapter previews will appear there as a I draft.

Star Me Kitten

Chapter Summary

Will thinks about Hannibal. Then he acts. Happiness ensues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You are wild and I'm in your possession
Nothing's free, so fuck me kitten

- R.E.M., "Star Me Kitten"

As if by act of volition, Will's fever breaks some time after midnight. He wakes at 1:47 a.m. from another dream in which he's swept down the Mississippi toward New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. For several long moments, he wonders whether Hannibal has put him in the bathtub again, or if Hannibal has been dumping buckets of water on him. He realizes why he's soaked to the skin once the room swims into focus and he can make out its contours in the weak ambient city light filtering past the curtains. He wants to divest himself of the sopping shirt and pajama pants, but he hasn't got the strength to move. Instead, he stares at the orange peel texture of the ceiling, noticing how the little bumps and mounds catch the pale light. He's reminded of snow under moonlight. The tracks of the stag. He'd been tracking the stag in his sleep. Maybe he still is. He shivers in his wet clothes until his eyelids flutter and the residual image of tracks on ceiling snow sends him off to sleep.

When he opens his eyes again, the light streaming through the window says it's midday. He hasn't moved an inch. Stale sweat makes him wrinkle his nose. How must he smell to Hannibal? Disgusting, surely. He needs a bath or a shower – oh, how he misses showers – but first he has to pee and find something to quench his powerful thirst. Which means he has to get up. Which means he has to move. His body feels heavier than it did yesterday, something he didn't think was possible.

Will sits up slowly, wincing as his exhausted muscles protest. He feels like he's been swimming against a current for hours, like he really was washed out to sea and had to fight the ebb tide all the way back to shore. His shirt is stiff and salty. He pulls it over his head without thinking only to get it caught in the IV line. He doesn't remember Hannibal putting it back in, but Hannibal's displeasure at him accidentally pulling it out yesterday remains vivid. He thinks about calling Hannibal's name, but he isn't sure Hannibal is home. Even if he were, Will wants some time to himself to think now that his mind is clear. He peels the tape back,

dislodges the needle, wipes it clean, and staunches the tiny wound with his shirt. The sting of salt in the wound makes him feel good somehow. Alive.

Will leans back against the headboard to get his bearings. His memories of last night are hazy like memories from childhood: he isn't sure what really happened and what was a trick of his mind. Each memory glows red at the edges like a hot coal. He remembers the terrible thrill of watching his own flesh bubble and pop and spit and yet somehow retain the shape of an arm. It hadn't hurt though the heat of it made him sweat. The uncanny smell of cooking meat was more delicious than it had any right to be. Then Hannibal touched his hand and Hannibal's skin started boiling, too, and Will had been terrified that he was going to drag Hannibal into his violent world yet again. All of Hannibal boiled after that and Will remembers hearing himself scream before everything burst into flames. The whole house burned down around the two of them. Will remembers trying to run only to find himself stuck in place. Hannibal was stuck, too, but he seemed calm about it, never averting his eyes from Will's, never showing any reaction to the fire.

That was a hallucination. As he reconstructs the scene, he realizes Hannibal must have touched him in an effort to bring him back to reality. That makes sense. That's something Hannibal would do.

Then everything skipped like a scratched record and he woke up confused with Hannibal standing impassively in front of him. He'd been sure the house was about to burst into flames at any moment – that the fire from the stove would shoot up to the ceiling and consume everything. Then Hannibal touched his cheek and his fears vanished – and he'd cried in front of Hannibal. Again. He didn't sob uncontrollably into Hannibal's chest as he'd done yesterday – embarrassment burns his cheeks at the memory – but he remembers tears making everything watery and Hannibal's gentle thumb wiping them away.

Hannibal kissed his hand. That had to have been real. His dreams and hallucinations tend toward the terrifying, not the mortifying or chivalrous.

But what he remembers most is – he sucks in a breath – is Hannibal looking like he wanted to fuck Will right then and there, on that very spot, regardless of his weakness and ugliness and slobbering emotion. Hannibal looked at him that way because Will had looked first. Will had been the one to show his desire. He'd very much wanted to kiss Hannibal's full lips and see the strong body he's only felt under Hannibal's many layers of clothing and go until Hannibal said stop.

Will doesn't know where any of this is coming from. Just that it feels right. It's the first thing that's felt right since he was shot. Hannibal knows who he is and where his head is and Hannibal wants him and he wants Hannibal back. That's all he needs.

But then there's the case. The diabetics. Lounds' "Sugar Sheriff" moniker may be forced but it's on to something: this killer is a vigilante. He shouldn't be too difficult to catch. Jack should have a good feel by now for who he is, but Will knows he'll be able to take one look at the next crime scene and know whether this is a medical professional acting out of some strange reversal of the Hippocratic Oath, a killer who's lost someone close to him to the disease, or something in between. He can't tell from the cell phone photos Lounds bought off

some local cop. He needs to see Zeller's work. Maybe with Zeller's photos and the forensics reports alone he could do some good.

These thoughts make him feel useful and in control of himself. Hannibal thinks it's too soon and maybe he's right, but maybe he doesn't realize how badly Will needs to feel useful and in control.

Will takes a deep breath. He may need the thrill of the work, a sure thing, more than he needs the thrill of pursuing Hannibal, anything but sure. Work is easier. He misses it. He can't miss something with Hannibal if he doesn't have it yet. So, although Hannibal won't like it, Will resolves to call Jack as soon as he's taken care of his more immediate needs.

The bleeding has stopped when Will checks his arm. He slowly shifts his legs until his feet are on the floor, gets set with the crutches, and braces for the dizziness of standing. His arms shake with the effort of holding himself in place. He forces himself to take deep, steadying breaths as he waits for the dizziness, no doubt caused by low blood sugar, to pass. He listens for Hannibal as he makes his way to the bathroom. Nothing.

Nearly ten minutes later, the kitchen is empty as Will gets a glass, fills it with water, and drains it in one long chug. He refills the glass and sets it on the counter, then looks around at the empty room. This is the first time he's seen Hannibal's kitchen without Hannibal in it. It's spotless. The metal surfaces remind Will of an industrial kitchen rather than a domestic one. It needs Hannibal in that white apron that clings so closely to him to imbue it with domesticity. Without him, it's barren.

An image of Hannibal cooking appears before his eyes and he sees himself – whole, no pain, no limp, no scar – sneak up behind Hannibal and kiss the back of his neck. Nibble on his ear and suck his earlobe. Will sees the look of pleasure on Hannibal's face. He's lost, wild, out of control. Like nothing Will has ever seen before.

Will unties the apron and pushes it aside so he can reach Hannibal's zipper. Hannibal is rapturous when Will strokes his cock for the first time, slowly, to get a feel for him, and then needy when Will speeds up to test his limits, discover what he likes, and –

The sound of the front door closing snaps Will out of his fantasy. He flushes deep red. In his pajamas, there's no hiding his erection. Hannibal will be in here any moment, so Will does the only thing he can think of: he braces himself, puts his full weight on his injured leg, and lets pain do the work of draining the blood from his dick as he limps to the same chair he'd occupied last night. He sits carefully and tries to swallow the pain so Hannibal won't see it.

Shit, this is going to be awkward. *Shit*, he didn't put on a fresh shirt. He can't do anything about the flush that colors his bare chest. Hannibal has already seen him naked, sure, but that was *before* all of… this.

Hannibal is wearing his blue ensemble today. The blue tie and blue patterned jacket over the yellow shirt. Will forces himself to look away. His leg hurts like a sonofabitch but he's always had a high tolerance for pain. It isn't enough to keep desire at bay.

“Will,” Hannibal says, his tone slightly surprised and definitely pleased. “It’s good to see you up.”

“It’s good to be up,” Will replies. He offers a smile that turns out more pained than he intended, but Hannibal, wonderful Hannibal, doesn’t say anything about that.

Just: “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

Hannibal smiles. “Something quick, then.”

Will returns his smile but doesn’t let his eyes linger on Hannibal. Too tempting.

Hannibal wordlessly brings him the glass of water he’d left on the other side of the room, then removes his jacket and disappears. He’s wearing that apron of his when he returns and Will shifts in the chair to cover the twitch of his cock. He tries to keep his eyes focused on something else, but the most interesting thing in the room is moving and therefore a natural object of his attention.

Hannibal keeps looking over at him, too. Checking up on him? Or checking him out?

Will shifts again – and again – and then he can’t take it. He mumbles something about pain pills and, with quickness he didn’t think he had, gets up and hobbles back to his room, closing the door behind him. He’d love to take a bath so he can relieve some tension, but that isn’t going to happen. He settles for palming himself a few times through his pajamas, thinking the token gesture will calm him. He shudders with delight instead and immediately stops, realizing it was a mistake to touch himself. His body pulses with desire. This has to happen now.

First, though, he shakes two pills out of the orange bottle on the dresser, dry swallows them, and tosses fresh clothes onto the bed. He thinks about locking the door, but Hannibal would knock first and heed any request for an extra moment. No need to lock a door. It would only show a lack of trust that Will doesn’t feel.

Will sits on the bed, setting the crutches aside, and slides his pajamas down his hips. He’s careful to keep the wound out of sight. With it covered, he looks normal. He looks like someone Hannibal could want.

He closes his eyes as he touches himself with a sure, familiar stroke. Pleasure floods his body. He envisions the memory of Hannibal’s lusty expression. If anything was actually burning last night, it was Hannibal’s eyes. Will flexes his unengaged hand where Hannibal kissed it and recalls the brush of his lips. Hannibal wanted to kiss him. Hannibal had been crouching in front of him. How easily he could have leaned forward and pulled Will out of his pants and lowered his head and *sucked*.

Will bites his lip to suppress a moan and makes himself slow down. Memories blend too easily into powerful fantasies full of Hannibal’s presence – his rich voice, his exotic scent, his

heat. Will isn't going to last long no matter what, but he wants to draw this out for another minute at least.

Feet firmly on the floor, he lies back on the bed and gently strokes himself. He imagines being whole and well and doing what he envisioned earlier: sneaking up behind Hannibal, snaking a hand under his apron and into his trousers, and pulling him out. He's hot and hard and heavy with need in Will's hand. Will strokes him gently until he's wet, then slicks his hand and fists Hannibal's cock with urgency. Testing limits. Hannibal tosses his head back and makes the most undignified noise of pleasure. Will attacks his neck, sucking and kissing the flesh hard enough to bruise. He ruts against Hannibal's hip like an animal, moaning into Hannibal's shoulder.

He pauses in his frenzy to linger on the head of Hannibal's penis, squeezing up with just the right amount of pressure to make Hannibal hunger for more. He waits for Hannibal to say it, to ask him for more.

"Say it," he growls.

"More, Will." Hannibal is breathless. He bucks up into Will's hand. "*Please*."

Will nips his neck and obliges, choosing a pace that makes Hannibal's back arch. Hannibal writhes, trapped between Will's rutting hips and the kitchen island. Will pulls back to free himself and stroke his own erection with his other hand. He matches the two rhythms, pumping fast, wanting to wring every last drop of come out of Hannibal and himself. Maybe he says that or maybe Hannibal knows his thoughts, because as soon as he thinks it, Hannibal starts coming in his hand. Will thrusts against Hannibal's clothed hip without regard for how nice his damn trousers are. They belong to Will now. Hannibal belongs to Will now.

Will comes so hard that the first hot stripe shoots up to his chest. His entire body strains with the effort and everything goes fuzzy as he spills onto his stomach in spurts of pure pleasure. His hand falls away and he closes his eyes and floats in the warm, calm sea of the afterglow.

Everything is perfect.

Spots like tiny particles dance in front of his eyes when he looks up at the ceiling as he catches his breath. It hasn't been that good in a long time.

All too aware he could fall asleep like this – half-lying on the bed, semen cooling on his stomach and chest (he's very pleased with that shot) – Will forces himself to sit up long before he wants to. He slides the pajama pants off, lifting his bad leg under the knee to free them, and turns them inside out to wipe the semen sliding down his belly like ice cream on a hot day.

Hannibal is probably going to notice when he does the laundry, but Will rights the pajamas regardless, balls them up, and tosses them into the laundry basket peeking out of the open closet doors. He dresses perfunctorily in a clean shirt and another pair of pajamas, then gets to his feet and stops at the dresser to put on a thick coat of deodorant. At the very least, he can avoid smelling like he just came. Whatever Hannibal is cooking – it smells great – will cover the odor, too.

But Will feels good. So good that if Hannibal were to ask him directly if he just jerked off, he'd own up to it. Odds are high that Hannibal would find it sexy. Will smiles to himself at that thought. Yes, the esteemed Doctor Hannibal Lecter of the fancy dinner parties would find the idea of Will Graham masturbating to him sexy. Desire stirs in his groin again and he lets his head fall to his chest with a groan: he's hopeless.

He schools his face as he opens the door and limps back to the kitchen. It won't do to be flagrant about it. Though… would Hannibal appreciate a brazen display? He doesn't give himself time to consider it – even if he could. Between the relaxing release and the pain meds, he feels so, so, *so* good.

Hannibal's expression says *there you are* when Will meets his eyes. Will smiles drunkenly at him: *here I am*. He doesn't mean it as a come hither but his eyelids droop and it turns into one.

Hannibal merely looks amused. "You took your pain medication."

For once, Will hears. *Yes, for once, Dr. Lecter*. For once, he isn't afraid. Will sets the crutches aside and leans back against the butcher's block, placing his palms against it for support. For once, he doesn't feel like an invalid. He feels relaxed and good. He's a little high on the narcotic in the pills, too, he grants that, but he's been taking them for a week and he's never felt remotely close to this good before. It's control. Power. Lust.

"My leg hurt."

The words tumble out of his mouth and Hannibal tilts his head. Does he know he does that? How much it says about him? Surely he does.

Hannibal breaks eye contact first, looking down at the food he's cooking. It's nearly ready. Will's stomach growls. He smiles again, his underused facial muscles pulling a little. It's nice to have his appetites back. They make him feel human and whole rather than some hollowed out husk of a man.

"How many did you take, Will?"

"Two."

Hannibal glances up in that studied way of his. He looks like he's made a decision, though he's still uncertain about it. Will watches him turn off the stove and add thick slices of ham to a plate that looks, as usual, like a work of art. Will realizes he's grinning at Hannibal like a fool, but he feels too damn good to hide it. And anyway, Hannibal *did* say he should express his emotions.

Hannibal hesitates for a fraction of a second before he dries his hands and comes around the island toward Will. He does a little dance with that island, a little hip movement that Will's imagination can do a great deal with.

Hannibal stops when he's eighteen inches away, right on the edge of Will's personal space. He rests the back of his hand against Will's forehead. It's a clinical gesture if ever there was

one.

“It’s gone. It broke overnight,” Will says, still leaning back against the butcher’s block, his palms keeping him steady. His open posture says *I’m yours*. “I’m fine.”

Hannibal turns his head and looks at Will out of the corner of his eye, still uncertain, still deciding to commit to his decision.

“I know you are, Will.”

Hannibal’s quiet, reserved tone, the last vestige of his mask, hides a swell of – well, Will doesn’t know what, but he intends to find out. Will’s grin turns to a genuine smile, soft and warm and inviting. Hannibal’s reticence hangs by a thread. He reaches for Hannibal’s arm, intending to cut that thread by pulling him closer. As soon as his fingers brush flesh, Hannibal fixes him with the most intense stare he’s ever seen, takes a step forward, and kisses him squarely on the lips. Will’s eyes fall shut as he kisses back. He lifts his hand to Hannibal’s cheek. Hannibal’s lips are soft and warm but obviously a man’s. It’s different. Good different.

Will parts his lips in invitation and Hannibal deepens the kiss. This point of contact and the flush of hormones like wine in Will’s blood are the alpha and omega of the world.

When Hannibal pulls back, everything is buzzing and shiny and beautiful. Hannibal especially is beautiful. Will lets his hand fall away. Hannibal’s hand, which had made it to Will’s cheek, also falls away. There’s a barrier in Hannibal’s eyes that has more to do with reality – *the food will get cold; you’re tired, Will* – than with keeping distance. Will imagines a flood of desire barely contained by that dam.

“You need a bath, Will,” Hannibal says. Blood shoots straight to Will’s groin. “But first you need to eat. Go sit down.”

Hannibal nods toward the dinning room and turns on his heels to return to the food. But Will sees his flushed cheeks. The tiny smile he can’t hide. Will grins like an idiot as he takes up his crutches and hobbles to the dinning room. Hannibal kissed him and he saw fireworks and stars and magic. Jesus, he’s so hopeless already and it was only a kiss, and not a very intense kiss at that. Oh, but it *was* intense, though. His body hums with happiness as he sits at the table.

Hannibal kissed him. Hannibal finds him attractive. He finds Hannibal attractive. Hannibal also knows the depths of his madness and yet still seeks him out, still finds him worth pursuing. For the first time, Will feels truly known.

It’s the most satisfying feeling he’s ever experienced. He laughs quietly to himself and feels something that must be contentment.

Hannibal sets the plate in front of him and describes the food at length. Half of it is in French. Will doesn’t follow that part. He’s going to have to learn about this stuff. It’ll be a good thing to share with Hannibal. Hannibal will be a patient if exacting teacher.

Will waits to begin until Hannibal sits and is ready to eat. Though he was taught manners as a child, Will generally prefers to ignore them; now, though, he has occasion to use them. He puts his napkin in his lap and takes up his knife and fork.

This feels like the reverse of a date, Will muses as he slices into the ham. A kiss and then dinner. He knows that the kiss is all he's going to get before he falls asleep. Hannibal mentioned a bath – oh, that's definitely going to happen later – but Will can feel sleep tugging at him already as he slices his way through the ham. The assurance of food and sleep calms him, keeps him from trying to flirt, keeps him more or less normal.

"This is delicious," Will says. "Thank you for making it."

Hannibal smiles. "I'm glad you like it."

Will rolls a piece of fruit onto the ham and holds it up with his fork. "You said these are cranberries?"

"Yes."

"The ham is sweet, the cranberries are tart. The ham is hot, the cranberries are cold. The textures are different."

His observations are tentative enough that they come out as half-questions. When Hannibal looks up, it's like he's seeing Will for the first time. Like Will has done some trick Hannibal didn't think he could do.

"Yes," Hannibal answers. "They are complementary opposites."

"Complementary opposites," Will repeats. "I like that. You always do that when you cook."

Hannibal's smile turns slightly shy as though Will's basic observation is the best compliment he's ever received.

"I try."

"I think I noticed it before, but I'm usually thinking about something else."

Now Hannibal's smile becomes wicked as he looks across the table with his head down and his eyes burning with desire.

"I'm glad I have your full attention."

Will smirks. He feels no need to offer some cheesy comeback. It's so easy right now to be with Hannibal. There's some tension, sure. Hannibal looks ready to leap across the table and pin Will against the wall – *fuck*, Will's cock twitches at the image. Will would let him do anything he wants. But he's too relaxed, too sated, and too sleepy to feel more than a pleasant tug of tension. The promise of more to come is all he needs.

They eat at a leisurely pace, exchanging glances and smiles that feel like a subtle form of sex. Eye sex. That's what it is. It feels like making slow, unhurried, deeply meaningful love. Will

smiles around a mouthful of polenta, lowers his head, and looks coyly through his lashes at Hannibal. He sees Hannibal's unsteady intake of breath and grins. He had no idea how much fun it would be to ruffle Hannibal.

"This is a dangerous game you're playing, Will."

"It's not a game, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows at his title. *Okay*, Will concedes, *Hannibal it is.*

Hannibal gets up to take his and Will's plates back to the kitchen. He pauses in front of Will, both plates in hand.

"Dessert?"

"Please."

Hannibal smiles. Manners. He likes manners.

Will notices, to his great satisfaction, that Hannibal walks more slowly and stiffly than usual. He hadn't tried for a glimpse at Hannibal's crotch, but he doesn't need to. He knows what's happening there. His own cock responds to the thought of Hannibal's erection, the knowledge that it's him, Will Graham, who did that to him, and that it's him, Will Graham, who will undo him. Power like an electrical current courses through him. He adjusts the waistband of his pajamas to trap his half-hard dick. Not only does the sensation feel good, it makes his arousal less obvious. It's too bad he can't act on it now. He's driving poor Hannibal up the wall. But he isn't good for so much as a hand job right now.

Hannibal breaks his reverie by placing a piece of cheesecake in front of him. With raspberry sauce, whipped cream, and a garnish of mint. At least none of that was in French.

He sneaks a glance at Hannibal as the man returns to his seat. What he sees makes his cock pulse against the waistband: Hannibal *isn't* trying to hide his arousal.

Though he would very much like to rub himself through the cotton, Will keeps both hands on the table. Having jerked off earlier gives him a considerable advantage, as does the stupefying, numbing effect of the pain medicine. He could still get off – oh, how easily he could get off right now – but he doesn't feel the overwhelming urge to do so.

Hannibal, on the other hand – Hannibal is falling apart in front of him. Will is certain that as soon as he returns to his room for an unavoidable nap, Hannibal will go off somewhere and touch himself – and *fuck*, that thought gets him fully hard. He takes a deep breath as he swirls sauce and cream onto a bite of cheesecake. He concentrates on the creamy texture, the tartness of the sauce and the sweetness of the cream. A noise of pleasure escapes him and the look on Hannibal's face is priceless. Will almost feels like apologizing for working him up into such a state.

Yeah, he's got to go masturbate after this. He'll be walking funny all day if he doesn't. Will wonders where he'll go. To his bedroom? To the shower? No, not the shower. He'll go to his

bedroom, or somewhere else he can sit or lie down and be alone. Will he take his clothes off or will he risk getting come on that expensive suit?

Hannibal looks at him like he knows where Will's thoughts have gone. "You're thinking too much, Will."

"That's all I'm good for right now." Just in case it wasn't abundantly clear.

"You're always good for more than that."

Statements like that make Will feel expansive. He stops himself from thinking beyond that and puts his fork down. He wants to run his finger through the traces of sauce and cream, bring it up to his mouth, and lick it playfully. He's not a tease, though. He keeps his hands on the table as he sits back and sighs contentedly.

"That was really good."

Hannibal smiles and sits back, too. The moment, so charged earlier, calms between them. Will could sit and stare for a very long time, but a yawn interrupts him.

"Sorry," he says when he can speak again.

Hannibal is amused as he gets up and takes the plates. Will gets to his feet slowly and follows Hannibal to the kitchen, yawning again.

He stations himself near the sink as Hannibal adds the dessert plates to the pile of dishes. At Hannibal's quizzical look, he says, "I can dry."

Hannibal merely smiles and turns to face him. "You need a nap."

Will's nod turns into a droop. He shakes himself. "I can help first."

Hannibal takes two slow steps to close the distance between them. He places his hands on Will's hips and leans in to kiss him again. Fireworks and magic and the sweet taste of dessert on Hannibal's lips.

They're both breathing unsteadily when Hannibal pulls back.

"Nap," he says with a smile, then turns back to the dishes.

Will smiles tiredly as he limps back to his bedroom. He sits on the bed and adjusts his fading erection, then lifts his legs up and tucks them under the covers. He lies back and stares at the ceiling and thinks about how damn lucky he is.

Sleep comes down like the curtain at the end of a play. Behind that curtain, hidden in a world accessible only to him and Hannibal, Will dreams about slowly, painstakingly licking raspberry sauce off of every part of Hannibal's body until Hannibal comes in his mouth with a shout of pleasure.

Chapter End Notes

Follow me on the Tumblblogs if you're so inclined. solitarythrush.tumblr.com I can't tell you where we're going, but I can promise there will be more sexxy times along the way.

You Quench My Heart

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal have fun sexy times before the coming angst.

Chapter Notes

This chapter and the next one will be very smutty, then I'll pick up the scene fills with "Entree," at which point the angst spiral will begin.

As he pulls the car out of the tawdry strip mall where Will's insurance sent him for physical therapy, Hannibal grips the steering wheel like it's the throat of the tall, redheaded physical therapist – athletic, good lungs, clean liver – who delivered Will to him in such terrible shape. Apparently, both Hannibal's conversation with the man before Will's appointment about his recent illness and the directive he'd issued that Will's pain be minimized had fallen on deaf ears.

Instead, when he'd arrived to pick Will up, Will was waiting by himself in a wheelchair near the door so completely consumed with pain – face twisted, body tense, tears running down his cheeks – that Hannibal hadn't wasted any time asking for the man's business card. He'll get it tomorrow and soon a new physical therapist will treat Will. If he weren't consumed with rage, he'd be sorting through the recipes he'll make for Will once he's secured the pig's best meat, but now he can think of little more than what he's just seen and the trembling man in the passenger's seat.

Will tried to give him a weary smile when he'd first seen Hannibal, but he withdrew after that, climbing inside his pain as though it were a tunnel he had to pass through. He's the same ghastly shade of pale he was when Hannibal found him on the floor a few nights ago after he'd been sleepwalking. And this is with the painkillers he willingly took before his appointment, his face saying then that though he expected to be tired afterward, he expected also to have as much of Hannibal as he could get.

Hannibal's hands twist the tan leather tightly enough to whiten his knuckles.

He takes a deep, calming breath and relinquishes his rage. It does Will no good now. Will, whose head hangs between his shoulders as he hugs himself with such force that every muscle in his upper body quivers. Hannibal reaches over and squeezes his shoulder. Will's shuddering breaths turn to hitched gasps. A tired groan of pure misery escapes him, the first

noise he's made. Hannibal digs his fingers into the long, thin trapezius muscle so Will will know that Hannibal understands the black depths of his pain.

He runs his fingers up to Will's neck, still digging into the tense tissue, and drives recklessly until they're home.

Hannibal pulls the keys out of the ignition. "Stay here," he says. "I'm going to get you a shot."

Will doesn't acknowledge him. Hannibal walks quickly to the door, through the kitchen, down the hall, into the bathroom, and to the vial of liquid relief, and just as quickly back to Will, who hasn't moved, so lost is he in his tortured world.

Hannibal opens the passenger's side door, pushes up Will's sleeve, and sterilizes a patch of skin.

"This is going to burn."

Will's deltoid is rigid under the needle. His arm will hurt well into tomorrow, but it can't be helped. Hannibal caps the syringe and puts it in his pocket so he has a hand free to massage Will's neck. Several long seconds pass before morphine dulls pain's sharp edge and Will breathes easier.

Will takes several deep breaths, opens his eyes, and rubs his shoulder, blinking at the sunlight. "That does burn."

He reaches up to rest his hand on Hannibal's arm and tips his head back, clearly needing a moment to shake off the remnants of pain. Hannibal's thumb and forefinger move up to the tendons just beneath Will's skull.

"Better, though," Will sighs, his eyes falling shut again.

Hannibal moves his hand up to Will's sweat-soaked hair and rubs circles above his temple. He charts Will's skull as a phrenologist might, his fingers exploring the subtle contours while delivering considerable relief.

Hannibal turns his hand and caresses Will's cheek. He smiles sadly when Will's eyes flutter and he leans into the gentle stroke. He has a fondness for Will he did not anticipate. Will means more to him than he could ever have supposed.

"Come on," Hannibal says.

He waits for Will to move his feet out of the car and onto the driveway before offering Will a steadying hand that becomes an arm and then a shoulder. Will stands shakily by himself while Hannibal goes to his left side and ducks under his arm. Hannibal is patient with Will, who is shaking and panting again by the time they reach the kitchen. He stops when Hannibal tries to turn him into the bedroom and rests his right arm against the door frame so he can lean into it and off of his injured leg. Hannibal waits for him to catch his breath.

Will's eyes are pained and exhausted yet full of spirit when he looks at Hannibal.

“I was looking forward to that bath. I mean, I live with seven dogs and *I* think I stink.”

Hannibal studies him – peaky where he isn’t flushed, tachycardic and hypertensive from exertion, still hurting because Hannibal gave him just enough morphine to take the edge off but no more, thirsty from an arduous hour of sweat and pain – but sees nothing bad enough for him to insist Will go to bed.

“You do stink,” he agrees. The corner of Will’s mouth quirks with amusement.

He gets Will settled on the toilet seat, starts the bath, and leaves to get Will some water. He stops in his bedroom to hang his jacket up and remove his vest, tie, and shirt so he’s left in his undershirt. He leaves his trousers on but suspects Will will get him to remove them, too. Will wants to move faster than he physically can.

Yesterday, Hannibal felt oddly threatened by that aggressiveness. It’s been clear to him since his first exchange with Will Graham that the man has deep-seated anger he does not fully acknowledge. Today, though, he’d seen that Will’s aggression toward him is purely sexual and has little to do with his anger. Indeed, Hannibal was intrigued when Will appeared with the scent of semen on him, masked poorly by deodorant, and then driven so wild by Will’s advances that he’d had to initiate physical intimacy. His plans for Will haven’t changed. This is yet another way, perhaps the best way, to help Will see who he really is. Sex is a powerful motivator, a powerful driver of action, not just for Will but for Hannibal, too. Hannibal knows now not to exempt himself from that drive when it comes to Will Graham.

Will has his shirt off and is using it to clean the sweat from his face when Hannibal returns with a glass of water and an extra pain pill. Will swallows the pill and drinks half of the water without taking his eyes off of Hannibal. He sets the glass aside and rakes his eyes possessively over Hannibal’s upper body. Hannibal can’t stop his pulse from quickening or blood from pooling in his groin. Will is an intoxicant and he knows it.

“You don’t *have* to keep your shirt on,” Will suggests, his body flushed with desire.

Hannibal’s eyebrows jump a fraction as he slowly untucks his undershirt, grasps the hem between thumbs and forefingers, and lifts the fabric over his head. Will drinks in the sight of him. His open admiration, the way he parts his lips, the gallop of his pulse – he is truly beautiful. When he glances up to meet Hannibal’s eyes, desire shines in his own.

“Or your pants.”

Will’s eyes widen when Hannibal doesn’t hesitate to reach for his belt. Now it’s his turn to catch Will off guard. He keeps his eyes on Will’s captivated face, noticing the activity in Will’s pants out of the corner of his eyes. He presses himself against his abdomen before unbuttoning and unzipping his pants. His trousers fall in a whisper of fabric. He steps out of them and slides them away.

Will is mesmerized by the tent in Hannibal’s black silk briefs. A boquet of androgens thickens the steam-filled air.

After a moment, Will takes a deep, shaky breath, his fingers twitching as though he imagines himself tearing the briefs off and taking Hannibal in his mouth. When Will licks his lips, Hannibal knows that's what he's thinking about. Blood surges to his trapped cock.

"Your turn," Hannibal prompts.

Will's expression falters and the excitement fades from his eyes. The fingers of his left hand drum on his thigh just above the wound. It's a tic he's developing. It appears when he imagines his future and sees himself scarred.

"My turn," Will grumbles.

Always so unsure about himself. And now he thinks he's ugly. Hannibal gets down on one knee in front of Will and stops Will's hand, though the gesture is unnecessary: Will has nearly ceased breathing in surprise. Hannibal doesn't let himself smirk. He warned Will that this was a dangerous game.

Hannibal hooks his thumbs inside the waistband of the sweatpants and underwear Will wore to physical therapy. Will places a hand on Hannibal's shoulder so he can lift his hips and Hannibal slides both garments off in one quick but careful move, leaving Will in nothing but his socks. Now it's his turn to stare. Will's cock, already hard, twitches as blood shoots into it quickly enough to leave Will lightheaded. Will's breathing goes ragged and his fingers knead Hannibal's shoulder urgently. Hannibal waits for Will to tell him to stop staring but the command never comes. Will's nails dig into his flesh. It's Hannibal who makes the choice to look away, and it's a difficult one. If Will weren't in dire need of the bath he'll shortly take, Hannibal would have already taken Will's cock in his mouth.

Will seems to know what he's thinking when he finally shifts his gaze to Will's eyes. Will reaches down clumsily to yank his socks off and moves his feet into the tub. Hannibal helps him all the way in, making a note to get one of those shower chairs that Will will see as an affront to his dignity but which he nonetheless needs. Water laps over the edge of the tub and spills on the floor as Will begins to hurriedly splash himself, thinking only of getting clean so he can pursue the nearly naked man in front of him.

Hannibal puts a hand on Will's chest to still him and chuckles when Will starts. He'd been so intent on his task that he'd forgotten Hannibal for a moment.

Will understands Hannibal's intentions when he sees a loofah and a new bar of soap Hannibal picked out this afternoon just for Will. Its spicy aroma with a woody base is meant to compliment aspects of Will's personality. Hannibal will be able to smell this on him days after he uses it, so it must reflect a substantial part of who he is.

Will rests his back against the wall and watches with undisguised interest as Hannibal wets his hands, lathers them with soap, and indicates that Will should raise his right leg. Hannibal starts with his foot, massaging circles in the sole and hitting pressure points that make Will gasp. He holds Will's foot and runs his fingers between Will's toes, recording each of his responses for later. His strokes become longer as he moves up tendons to the calf and works the muscles of Will's lower leg from different directions.

He pauses at Will's knee, his thumbnail next to a scar nearly an inch long and old enough to be from childhood, and looks inquisitively at Will.

"Broken bottle. On the beach. I fell on it. I must have been five or six."

Hannibal bends down and kisses it, just barely brushing his lips against Will's skin. His head bent as if in supplication to the trace of the wound, he looks up at Will through his lashes. Will's eyes are nearly black, all blown pupil. Now he's beginning to see that his scars don't mar him but rather make him who he is. That they make him beautiful.

Hannibal continues to Will's quadriceps, changing his stroke so his thumbs move slowly and incrementally up Will's thigh. Will reaches out and touches Hannibal's bare shoulder as though he craves more contact. Hannibal stops before he goes too high and bends Will's leg so he can access the muscles of the hamstring. He works the outer side slowly, digging his thumbs in, before moving inward. The angle is more difficult, but he manages. He stops again before he reaches Will's groin, though he's sorely tempted to touch Will.

Will makes a noise of frustration. He's been insistently hard the whole time, but then so has Hannibal. Hannibal smirks at him this time and Will narrows his eyes in false annoyance. He knows this is payback for his teasing at lunch.

With great care, Hannibal reaches for Will's injured leg and begins with his foot, careful to use angles that won't cause him pain. Will helps by lifting his leg below the knee and holding it in place so Hannibal has better access and can use both of his hands. Will doesn't relax right away, but by the time Hannibal is done with his foot, his eyes are closed and pleasure shows on his face. Eyebrows raised, lips parted, head tilted back: he looks pre-orgasmic. Hannibal memorizes his expression.

He stops when he reaches Will's knee and encourages him to put his leg down. Hannibal rinses the soap from his leg and runs his hand down to Will's foot again. Will watches him curiously. When Hannibal shifts his gaze to the mangled mess of Will's left thigh, Will's eyes follow him. His expression hardens and the ghost of a frown appears on his face. He would fidget if he weren't calmed by the massage and painkillers.

Hannibal places a wet hand on Will's sternum. Will's eyes go wide as Hannibal leans across the tub wall to kiss him. Hannibal adjusts his erection so it can rub against the porcelain, then runs his other hand up Will's cheek and into his hair. Will reaches up with a wet hand for the back of Hannibal's neck and parts his lips. Hannibal accepts the invitation with his tongue and is rewarded with a small moan from Will. Will kisses languidly, letting Hannibal lead. Though relaxed, Will isn't entirely sure of himself; his intimate experiences have been hindered by his fear of opening himself to others. He's gotten over that fear remarkably quickly, but he remains more or less inexperienced.

Hannibal closes the kiss with a smile and takes Will's bottom lip gently between his teeth. Will's stubble grates the tender inner flesh of Hannibal's lip in a way that is not altogether pleasurable, but the beard burn is well worth it when he sucks Will's lip and Will gasps harshly with need. Will's eyes are wide again. No one has done that to him before.

Hannibal releases Will's lip and pulls away with a sensual, possessive smile. Hormones sing through his blood. The earthy scent of Will's desire pulses like a ground bass beneath a symphony of spicy, woody soap and neutral bathwater, the oddly pleasant staleness of dried sweat in Will's hair, and the salty tang of pre-come from Hannibal's cock. He closes his eyes and breathes in the bouquet as he allows himself a few quick pumps.

"No touching," Will says playfully through the thick haze of desire. "Not until I get to touch."

The thought of Will touching him sends a pulse of electricity to the nerves in his groin. His dick jerks almost painfully in response. The hint of a growl joins Hannibal's long exhale as he lets himself go.

Will has that wickedly pleased look on his face. Power and possession dance gracefully around raw, animal need. When they do eventually fuck, they're going to tear each other apart.

Hannibal's hand tightens around the loofah as he flexes his arm. Will does this to him, makes him so powerfully lustful. Makes him want to grab and slap and bite and *take*. Will belongs to him. Will is his to shape and mold. *His*.

Will stares rapturously as Hannibal lets part of his darkness show. His exhale shudders and he runs his fingers up Hannibal's arm, then sits up to crush his lips against Hannibal's. He laps hungrily at Hannibal's mouth and growls. Hannibal takes over and the kiss becomes all teeth and tongues. Will grabs urgently at Hannibal's shoulders, his chest, his neck, his cheeks, his hair. Hannibal just barely has the presence of mind to hold Will steady so he can touch. Hannibal's blood follows Will's hands, the pili of his skin erecting everywhere Will touches him.

He has no idea how long Will's impatient hands course over his flesh and make his blood burn. Though overeager, Will remains deliberate and thorough – much more so than Hannibal expected him to be. He pauses to thumb Hannibal's nipples and somehow knows the pleasure his nails can give when he slides them lightly up Hannibal's cheek. Perhaps he is not as inexperienced as Hannibal had supposed. That thought hardly registers amid the intense sensation. He's tuned like an instrument to Will's hands; Will plays him with surprising expertise.

When they eventually part, Will stares for a moment while he catches his breath, his lips livid and cheeks flushed, then grabs the soap and sponge and hurriedly washes his chest. When he's done, Hannibal washes Will's back just as quickly while Will does his best to wet his hair. Hannibal turns the shower on so Will can shampoo his hair and pulls the plug in the tub. By the time he's put a towel down to soak up the water on the floor so Will won't slip, Will is rinsing his hair. He winces when he moves his leg to turn off the shower but pain is no match for his desire-driven impatience.

"Careful," Hannibal warns when Will holds his arm out to be helped up. He waits for Will's acknowledgement before he slides his arm under Will's, braces himself, and lifts. Will puts more strength into the awkward motion of getting out of the tub and onto the tub wall than Hannibal thought he had left, another measure of how powerful his desire is. Once he's

scooted the arm's length to the toilet seat, Will mercilessly moves his leg, annoyed by the way it encumbers him, then grabs the towel and dries like he's late for the best moment of his life.

Hannibal doesn't tell him to slow down. He's impressed by Will's ability to fight through pain. Will's hair sticks up in all directions after he scrubs it with the towel. Hannibal sniffs with amusement when Will runs his fingers through it in an effort to tame it. He offers Will the comb that had been just out of Will's reach. Will rakes the comb through his hair once and holds his hand out again so Hannibal can help him up.

The short trip from the trashed bathroom to the guest room is quick but uncomfortable for both Will, who's tired and hurting, and Hannibal, who's still confined to his underwear. Will's erection has faded by the time Hannibal helps him sit on the foot of the bed. Before Hannibal can sit next to him, Will slips a finger into the waistband of Hannibal's briefs. His eyes demand permission. Hannibal bends to kiss him, then climbs onto the bed on his knees to help Will scoot back until he's reclining against the headboard. He remains on his knees and relays a silent *yes* when Will catches his underwear again.

Will licks his lips before lifting the material up and over Hannibal's lively penis. He stops and stares and then, like a fascinated child, he reaches over and grips Hannibal like he's been waiting years for this moment. Hannibal keeps his eyes on Will's as Will slowly strokes and squeezes. The angle is wrong, but Will's hand on his cock feels undeniably good. He lets Will satisfy his curiosity, exaggerating his noises just a bit to teach Will what feels best.

When Will has done all he can do from the awkward angle, Hannibal slips his briefs all the way off and kneels next to Will again. He runs his hands along Will's chest, feeling the tight pectorals with tortuous slowness that tests even his patience. But this must be done right. When his hands linger on Will's refined abdominal muscles above the navel, Will digs the nails of his left hand into Hannibal's tricep, urging him to go faster. This is still part of the game, though, and Hannibal draws out his downward exploration for another long, full minute.

Will takes a harsh, anticipatory breath as Hannibal finally slides his fingers down Will's cock, closes his hand firmly at the base, and strokes upward. Will's gasp makes the wait worthwhile. Hannibal pumps slowly but deliberately, taking note of Will's reaction to each change in pressure, angle, and speed. He works Will for a few minutes using only Will's pre-come for lubricant. When he releases Will to retrieve actual lubricant from the drawer of the bedside table, he sees Will's appreciation of his forethought peek through the haze of sensual pleasure.

He touches Will's chin and leans in for a quick kiss, remaining inches from Will's face. "Do you trust me?"

As they did at lunch, Will's eyes say *yes* for him, but Hannibal waits for him to say the word.

"Yes."

For his direct, earnest answer, Will earns a smile before the next test. Carefully, Hannibal straddles him. Panic rises and fades in the span of a second, but Will doesn't move: total

trust. He's passed. Hannibal rewards Will for his trust by slicking his palm and fingers and showing Will what an artist with surgical dexterity can do.

Will moans into his kisses and tries to touch Hannibal in return. How gentlemanly. He's too uncoordinated to do more than fumble; he doesn't protest when Hannibal bats his hand away. Hannibal takes his left hand to his own cock so Will won't think he's being neglected. Will gets the message. He plants his palms on the bed and bucks into Hannibal's hand as best he can.

Hannibal brings Will close to the edge before he slows the pace and loosens his grip. In Will's liquid eyes, he sees the sexual side of the passion that drives him. Just as watching the darkness come out in Will when his mind works endlessly fascinates Hannibal, watching him skirt the edge of *le petite mort* titillates. Will's eyes flash with the confidence of a man who knows he is, what he wants, and how to get it. He grabs Hannibal's shoulders and crushes him with an urgent, needy kiss that melts into a moan when Hannibal changes the variables of pace, pressure, and angle.

He could do this with Will for a very long time, bringing him to the edge and pulling him back, but Will doesn't have the strength for it. He's straining to move his hips in rhythm with Hannibal's hand and Hannibal knows he won't stop until he reaches his goal. That much has been clear about Will Graham from the beginning: he's nothing if not relentless.

Knowing it's time to watch closely, Hannibal studies Will's expression as he gives Will the push he needs to soar. Head thrown back, throat exposed, Will bucks into his hand one last time and stays tense for a trembling second before he spills himself onto Hannibal's hand and his own stomach. Hannibal has never had a more beautiful lover. Will's orgasm fuels his own and he comes on Will's stomach in exquisitely thick stripes before Will's cock gives its last twitch. Will opens his eyes in time to see the end of Hannibal's orgasm. A smile appears for a second on his sated face as he collapses bonelessly against the headboard.

Hannibal swings his leg up and over Will's damaged leg and smacks his shoulder against the headboard, equally spent. He leaves just enough room between them that they don't touch but easily could. With his right index finger, he starts at the bottom of a patch of semen oozing down Will's stomach, runs it up Will's abs like he's plating sauce, and tastes the mixture with both sexual and culinary satisfaction. He knows Will is watching and that Will knows this look of pleasure by now: it's the one he reserves for the very best morsels.

When Hannibal opens his eyes, Will is trying to grin at him even though he's still coming down and half asleep. His amusement endears him to Hannibal even more.

"So, what," Will murmurs, "this happened because you were hungry?"

Hannibal smirks through his own afterglow. "I do enjoy alternative sources of protein."

Will sniffs as his eyes fall shut. Hannibal slides off of the bed to get a warm, wet cloth. He wipes the evidence of their pleasure from Will's stomach and encourages Will to scoot down so he can lie on his back. Will slides down in a heap and Hannibal covers him to the shoulders, then sits next to him and lightly brushes his still-damp hair.

“I’ll wake you up when dinner is ready.”

Will can’t offer more than a tiny nod, already in the arms of the sweetest, easiest sleep Hannibal has ever seen overcome him. He’s content in a way known only to animals and children. In spite of his repeated forays into violence and darkness, Will remains innocent. He isn’t untouched by violence and darkness, no, quite the opposite, but Will’s innocence is so pure that corruption doesn’t stick easily to it. The forts protecting his innermost qualities, the essence of who he is, remain strong in spite of the repeated assaults by the violent personalities he allows inside his head. But they cannot protect him forever. Perhaps, before they fall and the raging armies rape, pillage, and raze the earth, he will embrace his violent urges and hence his potential to be an even greater being than he is now. Only then will his forts hold, for only then will the assault on his defenses turn to aggressive offense. Will could be a beautiful killer.

Hannibal traces two days’ worth of stubble that’s come in around Will’s thickening beard. The short, stiff hairs prick the pad of his left index finger first on Will’s cheek and then on his neck. He pauses at Will’s carotid artery and feels life pulse through him. This finger pinched Will’s femoral artery shut eleven days ago. Hannibal marvels at the warm, strong blood under his finger now, in such opposition to the lifeblood that spurted out of him onto indifferent concrete, that tried to flood past Hannibal’s finger before he clamped the artery, that tried again during surgery to spray the clinically indifferent surgeon, that resisted stabilizing for a long hour after surgery, that came so terribly close to draining Will of the hard, true fact of his existence and placing him out of Hannibal’s reach forever.

A tear on his cheek surprises Hannibal. He doesn’t wipe it away. Instead, he bends down to press his lips worshipfully to Will’s carotid. He slides down on his side next to Will and slots his head into the space above Will’s shoulder where he can feel and hear Will’s pulse strong and steady in his neck. He places a possessive hand on Will’s chest. The scent of their combined release dominates the close space of the bodies pressed warmly together, a reminder not just of life but of love.

Hannibal holds Will tightly, breathing in his essence, until his arm turns heavy on Will’s chest and he, too, sinks into sweet and easy slumber.

The Best of What's Around

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal figure out what's going on between them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack calls Hannibal the next morning to check on Will's progress.

"He's doing well," Hannibal replies, standing next to the dishes in the sink, the phone in one hand and a scrub brush in the other. "Getting his stamina back."

Will, standing naked at the butcher's block with a towel in his hand, still flushed from the fantastic blow job Hannibal gave him not five minutes ago, doubles over with silent laughter. He has to hold onto the block to keep his balance. Hannibal, also naked because Will pushed his robe off to ogle his body, smiles at Will's unfettered mirth.

"The fever was a setback, but he's recovered. Still, his doctor will not clear him for field work for a few weeks. He may, however, be cleared to go back to teaching within the week."

Will shrugs and stretches his arms over his head as if to prove that he's gaining strength. He noticed more meat than usual at breakfast – protein so he can rebuild what he's lost. Good food, ample sleep, plentiful exercise: he'll be back sooner than Hannibal thinks if he keeps getting these three things. Oh, and regular sex with Hannibal. That thing, too.

He grins – and not just because Hannibal is standing there stark naked talking to Jack on the phone and it's absolutely hilarious. He grins because he can't stop himself from grinning. Because he's about as happy as he's ever been and he feels like grinning about it.

Hannibal catches his attention.

"Let me see if he's available."

Hannibal asks with an expression. Will rolls his eyes but holds his hand out for the phone. It's a little weird to be talked about as though he's not in the room, but so much weirder when the guy who's talking about him with his boss is also the guy who just blew him, who happens to be his psychiatrist, and who's standing naked before him like a feast. And now Will is going to talk to Jack while Hannibal watches. This is weird but… good? It *is* funny. But it's weird to talk to Jack, the only man who can make him timid. He almost doesn't want to, even with the promise of a case. Of course, he is recovering from a gunshot wound: he can blame any weirdness on pain meds.

These thoughts run through his head in the seconds it takes Hannibal to give him the phone.

“Will Graham,” he answers, shooting Hannibal his most suave expression.

Hannibal laughs in his reserved way as he crosses the kitchen to retrieve his robe where it pooled on the floor when Will shoved it off his shoulders.

Will half-listens as Jack asks him how he’s doing. Better. That’s good; he sounds better. Silence from Will, who watches Hannibal slip the robe on. Just as Hannibal leaves the room – where is he going? – Jack mentions the case. Will turns his full attention to Jack and the kitchen falls away. Jack says they have a promising lead. Good work on the part of the forensics team. He’s sorry Will can’t come with them tonight.

Will, who had forgotten his nakedness, remembers his injury. That he’s wounded, sick, crazy, fucked up. Not right. His posture slips a little and a frown appears on his face.

Jack’s wishing him a speedy recovery when Hannibal returns holding another robe. Will curses Jack internally as he hangs up. Dammit. He’d been in the best mood he can remember, and then Jack has to call with news he doesn’t want to hear.

He feels black and blue as he hands the phone to Hannibal and dons the robe. It’s Hannibal’s. It smells like him and Will can’t place the fabric right away. Will would much rather be naked with him again, laughing over the dishes, not having heard from Jack.

Hannibal turns the tap on and soaps a plate. “Bad news?”

Will scowls. “They have a lead.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow slightly as he hands the plate to Will. “You think they don’t need you.”

Will looks down at the plate he’s drying and says nothing.

“Will.”

He looks up. Hannibal has one of his sincere expressions on.

“They do. Though you might not need them.”

Will sniffs. He has no interest in going over that point again. He disagrees. He won’t be moved. But he doesn’t meet Hannibal’s eyes or challenge his assertion. Something about the conversation with Jack has got him down and he doesn’t know how to get back up.

They wash the dishes in silence for a few minutes. Will feels his dark mood spreading through the room like spilled ink. Dammit, Jack.

“It’s a nice morning,” Hannibal says lightly. “Blue sky. No clouds. Perhaps you might join me on a walk.”

Will nods and lets a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. This is Hannibal trying to cheer him up. He nods more vigorously and for a second thinks he's going to cry again. He tamps the urge down and wonders what the hell is going on with him. Maybe it's Jack getting into his head, making him feel insecure. Scattering his emotions. That's how he feels: scattered. Messy. A wreck.

And Hannibal's just standing there, washing a fork, waiting for an answer.

"Sure."

The word sounds anything but.

But Hannibal doesn't press him. They finish the dishes in silence. Hannibal suggests that Will get dressed while he puts the dishes away. Will limps back to his room, wondering how he should feel and what this all means. Hannibal is great. The fact that anyone with his combination of talents, looks, education, wealth, and all of the other things Hannibal has, that anyone like that would take such an interest in the son of a drunken boat mechanic, the breaking if not already broken half-hermit who imagines killing other people for a living, the lunatic with violence written on his body. That Hannibal would want him – it doesn't make sense.

He sighs as he buttons his blue plaid shirt, then limps over to the bed to sit so he can put his corduroys on. He pulls the pants up to his knees and stops. His left hand trembles, then moves over to the still-healing incision. Like the laces on a football, but smaller and tighter. Very neat. Hannibal's work.

His index finger hovers over the gnarled tissue. He hasn't touched it yet. Doesn't really want to now. But his trembling hand moves on its own and his fingertips ghost the ridge of sutured flesh. He shivers slightly and quickly pulls the pants up. They chafe. Hannibal left the wound uncovered all night and Will supposed he would say something if it should be covered again, but maybe he won't wait for Hannibal to say something. Maybe he'll do it himself. Because it's going to bother the hell out of him like this.

He goes to the bathroom, gets the supplies, and dresses it, frowning at how ugly it looks.

What could Hannibal possibly see in him.

But, he thinks, it's not like he's some charity case to Hannibal. Hannibal treats him like an equal. Always has. Moreover, the spark between them has always been there. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's some weird animal attraction thing. Because they feed off of each other in this irresistible way that reminds Will of natural forces – magnetic, gravitational, centripetal.

Then again, Hannibal came into his life with Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Maybe this is tied up in what happened when he shot Hobbs. In how much he liked it.

Because Hannibal isn't exactly his type. Not that he has a type. But if he does, it's brunette psychiatrists with kissable lips.

And yet this thing with Hannibal feels so good. So right. He doesn't have to be nervous about anything. Hannibal accepts him for who he is and seems happy with him continuing to be his acerbic self.

Will tapes the dressing down and pulls up his pants. Maybe he'll just go with it and try not to screw it up, and if it does get screwed up, he'll let it go. After all, it wasn't something he knew he wanted until he had it.

He feels better – clearer – by the time he has his shoes on and makes it to the kitchen. Hannibal is nowhere to be found. Probably takes him quite a while to get into one of his suits given how meticulous he is about everything. Like giving head. Really, *really* good head.

Will puffs out a sigh. Hannibal is good for him. He should be happy about that. If he isn't, there's something wrong with him.

When Hannibal comes back, he's wearing a cream cable knit sweater over a dark red oxford, looking like he's about to go yachting with the rest of the Ralph Lauren models. No one should be that attractive. But Hannibal is.

Will smiles. Hannibal wants him. Hannibal is *his*. Hannibal smiles back and has the great courtesy not to ask Will why he's smiling. Instead, he hands Will his jacket. Hannibal selects a jacket Will hasn't seen since the Hobbs case. He has a vague sense that Hannibal's jacket selection has more to do with fashion than with freaking him out, but he's still a little freaked out by it.

He tries to put it out of his mind as he limps out of the door, which Hannibal kindly holds open for him, and into the sunlight. He squints. It's a brilliant winter day. Endless blue sky. Not too cold. Brisk. On a day like this, if he weren't trapped indoors at work or trapped in his head at a crime scene, he'd be outside with the dogs, walking the fields and enjoying the sunshine. Their absence stabs him.

Hannibal, finished locking the door, joins him and they walk down the driveway to the sidewalk. Hannibal walks slowly while Will swings his crutches and tests how much weight he can put on his leg. Some but not enough. Sparks of pain shoot up his thigh when he puts more than a third of his weight on it.

Will remains silent as they pass lines of row houses with old stoops and bits of wrought iron here and there. Hannibal points out a few landmarks in the neighborhood. Will pays enough attention not to be rude as he scans the streets for entrances and exits, alleyways and blindspots. Though he was never a beat cop, he feels like one now as he lets his eyes glance off of faces, reading more about random lives than he wants to. He could deal with cities when he was younger. Not any more. Too many people. Too many lives.

Hannibal stays close by, occasionally protecting Will from the brush of a passerby. Hannibal is being good to him in spite of his mood. So Will does something he never does. He nods to an ornate church, asks Hannibal about it, and listens to the story Hannibal tells.

It's an old church with a few good stories attached to it. Hannibal seems pleased to be sharing what he knows. He has pride in his neighborhood. It makes sense. This is one of the oldest of

the old money neighborhoods in the country, dating back to its colonial days. How apropos that Hannibal lives in a district replete not just with culture but also history, fairly brimming with a sense of Old World aristocracy. The neighborhood fits Hannibal like one of his suits.

The original Washington Monument, smaller but no less impressive an erection than its D.C. counterpart, peeks over a building and comes into view as they round a corner. Trees line the other side of the street and Will relaxes just a bit when he sees them, even though winter has denuded them. This breath of nature is better than fresh air.

They cross the street and begin circumscribing each of the four small parks surrounding the pillar. When they've walked the outlines, Hannibal detours into a small shop. Will waits outside, not interested in knocking into things inside the tiny place. He breathes in the cool, refreshing air and looks up at the sky. Endless, endless blue. Like a vast expanse of hope.

Hannibal reemerges with a ribbon-tied box and two steaming coffees. Will follows him back across the street to a bench under a bare tree. He sits gratefully. By his count, they've done sixteen blocks. His leg aches and his wrists are sore from bearing so much of his weight. He sips the coffee eagerly, needing the caffeine. It's not as good as Hannibal's but still a far cry from the instant stuff he makes at home. Hannibal unties the ribbon, opens the box, and reveals two chocolate éclairs that look rich and delicious. For once, Hannibal doesn't tell him where the chocolate came from or what the filling is made of. He just passes one to Will, takes one for himself, and they eat in silence.

It's a good morning to be outside. Will begins to feel better. He should feel great, walking the streets with his new lover essentially on his arm, sharing a mid-morning snack shaped like a phallus in view of another phallus – very funny, Hannibal. He half-expects roosters to burst from the delivery truck across the street. Now he does let a smile pull at the corner of his mouth. Everything Hannibal does is deliberate. *Yeah*, Will thinks, tilting his head to look up at the Washington Monument, *I want to fuck you, too*.

"You look contemplative, Will."

"Just noticing the symbolism."

Hannibal's mouth quirks with amusement. Will's eyes follow two pigeons pecking at the cobblestones. He can't look at Hannibal when he says what he needs to say next.

"And wondering what this is."

He sips the coffee.

Hannibal isn't trying to look at him either, though he isn't uncomfortable. They could be two strangers sharing a bench.

"What do you want it to be?"

"I don't know. I've never done this before."

"Done what?"

Will sips the coffee again. It's something to do. Hannibal's tone is calm and even-keeled, understanding, more curious than anything else, but conversations like this make Will's skin feel too tight.

"Had sex with someone I know without planning to."

"Well," Hannibal says. "This can be whatever you want it to be."

Will doesn't like that answer. Too vague. He glances in Hannibal's direction, his eyes falling on a point past Hannibal's knees.

"What do *you* want it to be?"

Hannibal doesn't hesitate. "Pleasurable."

Will tilts his head, raising an eyebrow. "It *is* that."

"It doesn't have to be anything more than that."

Now Hannibal's looking at him, gaging his reaction.

Will thumbs the cardboard sleeve around the cup.

"So… we're friends with benefits?"

"I don't see why not."

"You're happy with that arrangement?"

"I am."

"So am I."

That's settled. And it was easy.

Will sips his coffee again. He shouldn't be suspicious, but he is. Just a little. Because things have never been easy for him. He's spent too much time killing within himself the craving for affection, care, and love to let it come back to life now. He can't let himself expect anything from Hannibal. He has to find some way to beat expectation back.

He'll take carnal pleasure with Hannibal when he can get it and not expect it when it's not in the air. He'll keep himself safe.

Once they finish their coffee and start back, Will feels better. Not carefree as he felt over breakfast, but lighthearted. A building on the corner where the park ends catches his attention. Rather, the enormous taxidermied stag head he can see through the window catches his attention. An impressive twelve-point buck. He hasn't dreamed about the stag since his fever broke.

"What's that?" He nods to the building, noticing the caduceus on the balustrade.

“The mansion of the city’s most esteemed hostess more than a century ago and a fine example of the pinnacle of Gilded Age culture. Mrs. Garrett, later Mrs. Jacobs, filled it with art and music until it rivaled the homes of New York and Newport.”

Then Will notices the small sign. The Garrett-Jacobs Mansion. A vision of Hobbs slashing Abigail’s throat swirls in front of him. He sees himself, yet again, shooting Hobbs over and over and over, advancing, his heart pounding, exhilaration rushing through his blood. Hobbs slumps against the kitchen cabinets and looks at him with the intensity of a dying man.

“*See*? *See*?”

All Will can do is pant and shake violently as Abigail’s blood pumps against his hand.

“Will.”

He starts and realizes he’s staring straight ahead, panting, as Hannibal’s hand rests on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think – ”

“It’s fine,” Will interrupts and limps away like he’s been burned.

Focused on the sidewalk and nothing else, Will doesn’t see Hannibal’s mouth curl slowly into a smile.

Chapter End Notes

The Garrett-Jacobs Mansion is a real place. ^_^ It's in the Mount Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore where I've decided Hannibal lives.

You Are the Everything

Chapter Summary

First time smut.

Chapter Notes

I take an unconventional approach to Hannibal and Will's sexual dynamic. Since Will's leg is messed up, they're limited in what they can do in terms of positions. That fact, along with Hannibal seeking pleasure and an equal in Will more than power/domination over him, means that you get bottom!Hannibal here. Give a go if you're curious; turn away if it's not your thing.

All you hear is time stand still in travel
And feel such peace and absolute stillness
Still that doesn't end
But slowly drifts into sleep

- R.E.M., “You Are the Everything”

The stag and the hallucination – vision? it felt kind of like that – haunt Will through the post-walk rest his body forces him to take. He can’t concentrate on *Tattlecrime.com* or even on the terms he and Hannibal just set for their intimacy. He lies in bed and stares at the laptop screen, absently massaging his thigh above the scar, remembering too much.

Hobbs’ eyes. Abigail’s blood. His own shaking hands.

He’s quiet at lunch, complimenting the food but not saying anything else. Hannibal gives him his space and looks apologetic. Will feels guilty for ruining yet another carefully-prepared meal with his memories and his mood, and retires for a nap feeling like a fuck-up.

He dreams vaguely of walking around the Washington Monument with the stag at his heels. Nothing happens in the dream. No scrutiny from the stag, no goring, nothing to suggest the meaning of its presence. It’s like walking Meadowlark Road with the stag a few weeks ago only to find himself awakened by the police with Winston at his heels: just blank walking, one foot in front of the other.

Hannibal's gentle hand on Will's shoulder brings Will out of the dream like he's been underwater and only remembered how to surface when Hannibal touched him. He needs a while to shake off sleep and doesn't realize until he's in the car that he wasn't physically diminished in the dream. Wasn't limping. Wasn't hurting. Maybe it means he'll recover fully from the gunshot, he thinks, as the city slides past. No one has told him yet what to expect. Just that the more he puts into physical therapy, the more quickly and thoroughly he'll recover.

So he works himself as hard as he can for an hour, putting most of his weight on his leg as he does laps back and forth between the parallel bars. He limps and grunts and curses until the pain makes him gag and nearly vomit. His physical therapist, a woman today, notices and makes him sit until he stops trembling. Sweat drips from the tip of his nose. He doesn't wipe it away. Then the torture resumes as she coaches him through straight leg raises and heel slides in alternating sets of ten until his shirt is wet enough to be wrung out.

"High pain tolerance," she says, appraising him critically. She smiles. "I can see I'm going to have to stop you before you want to stop."

Leaning back on his elbows, Will closes his eyes in acknowledgement as he catches his breath.

The session ends with the same exercises for his right leg to preserve muscle tone. He has time until Hannibal picks him up, so he requests a pair of free weights and a barbell and works on his chest, arms, and shoulders while an intern spots him.

Hannibal walks up smiling, his overcoat draped around his arm, as Will finishes his third set of butterflies. Will smiles back, feeling tired and sore but stronger. In the seconds he spends handing over the weights, sitting up, and toweling off, he can pretend that he's some virile gym rat who's caught Hannibal's eye. He feels good about himself for the first time since he talked to Jack this morning.

As the intern retrieves his crutches, Will thinks about what he'll do to Hannibal after dinner. Blow job. He's never given one before, but after this morning, he's eager to try.

His smile broadens.

He falls asleep in the car and doesn't argue when Hannibal escorts him to his room for yet another nap before dinner.

Later, when he's eaten, helped with the dishes, and had another of Hannibal's fine bath massages for his sore legs, he finds himself flat on his back with Hannibal straddling him. Hannibal presses him into the mattress and rubs their trapped dicks together with finite control.

When Hannibal tugs at his hair, Will takes it as encouragement and delves into Hannibal's perfectly gelled hair with both hands. He grins at the mess he makes. Some strands fall into Hannibal's eyes while others stick out comically. Will pulls at a handful of stiff hair behind Hannibal's ear and Hannibal moans as he licks Will's nipple, then travels up to claim Will's mouth in a rough kiss. Will is rough in return, pleased that he can be more aggressive with

Hannibal than he's been with anyone in the past. He senses that when he has his strength back, there will be an element of wrestling to their sexual encounters. He nips at Hannibal's bottom lip, testing him. Hannibal's return nip makes Will gasp as the tiny dot of pain enhances his pleasure.

After a lengthy exchange of kisses and sweat, Hannibal stretches to reach into the drawer with the lube. Hand job it is. Will is ever so slightly disappointed. He wonders if they can work out an angle so Will can blow him. He has a sense of what Hannibal did with his tongue and mouth this morning, but he isn't sure he can replicate all of it. Hannibal has proven an excellent guide, though, and Will wants to return the pleasure he's received today.

He's about to suggest it when Hannibal surprises him by producing not just lube but a condom. Hannibal tosses the foil package on Will's stomach, sets the lube on a cloth where they can reach it easily, and resumes his position straddling Will.

Will stares at him, his heart skittering at the possibility of sex. It's been too many years. Skeptical by nature, even more so when sex is concerned, he can't quite believe this is really happening. This is what Hannibal wants? It's out of Will's realm of experience. Never having made it past a hand job with another man before, Will was already in unfamiliar territory this morning when Hannibal sucked him off. But that was the best blow job of his life. Hannibal seemed to know exactly what to do at every moment to maximize Will's pleasure. So who's to say this won't be amazing sex?

When that thought lands, Will's cock jumps and he groans.

Hannibal pauses and tilts his head curiously, wondering what Will is thinking. Will has no idea what to say, so he keeps his mouth shut and uses his hands instead, grabbing Hannibal's hips. He squeezes, not hard enough to hurt but with ample force to lay claim, then slides his hands along the slick plane of Hannibal's ass. He strokes its lithe contours, dipping between the cheeks but not lingering. He knows where he should go but he isn't sure what etiquette dictates about how to get there – and for once in his life, he cares deeply about etiquette.

Hannibal, sensing that Will doesn't quite know what to do, lubes a finger and slips it between their bodies until it's out of sight. Will watches with rapt attention, his eyes wide. When Hannibal tips his head back and closes his eyes at the sensation, Will's mouth drops open and ragged, desperate breaths come out.

He lets go of Hannibal's hips, so surprised is he by the look of sheer pleasure on Hannibal's face. Hannibal, always so contained, so reserved, is losing himself, letting himself go, letting Will see him in a special, beautiful way. Lust devours the last shred of Will's analytical capability.

Will's hand runs up Hannibal's thigh of its own volition. Hannibal catches it, withdraws his finger, and offers Will the lube, his eyes shining. Their soft, excited breaths mingle in the air, the only sound in the room.

This is really happening.

Will takes the lube and coats his fingers. He rubs his hands together until they're slick and warm, and strokes Hannibal's cock with his left hand. With his right, he feels around until he finds a slit that gives when he presses on it. Watching for Hannibal's reaction, Will slowly pushes his finger inside.

Warm. Tight. So tight.

Will's dick jerks as anticipation blossoms in his chest. Hannibal closes his eyes and parts his lips with pleasure. Will doesn't remember this feeling *that* good when he tried it, but he's only done it to himself before. Someone else doing it must make the difference. Like being tickled.

Will experiments, moving his finger in and out and in different directions, searching. He may not have done this before, but he's not completely ignorant. When he finds what he's looking for, Hannibal gasps and arches his back, and *fuck* that's sexy.

Will quickly marshals his limited, theoretical understanding of anal sex. He withdraws his finger, pairs it with another, and thrusts back in at the right angle to make Hannibal moan.

Will's mouth goes dry. This is really happening. He hasn't had sex in too many years and now he's about to have it with this amazing man. With Hannibal.

Excited but worried he'll get ahead of himself, Will fingers Hannibal with a slow, insistent motion, landing again and again in just the right place. Hannibal's pulse throbs in his neck. Head tossed back, mouth open in an O, little gasps issuing from deep inside him, he's the epitome of eroticism.

Will times the thrusts of his fingers with strokes of Hannibal's cock, aiming to maximize Hannibal's pleasure as Hannibal did for him this morning. Hannibal enjoys this so much more than any of Will's previous partners have enjoyed anything he's done, so he keeps going for a few minutes just so he can watch Hannibal's reaction. His ability to reduce Hannibal to two points of sensation makes him feel incredibly powerful.

At length and because he understands that two fingers do not equal the girth of his impatient, twitching cock, Will pulls out and adds a third. And Hannibal takes it. His ass takes it, clenching around Will's fingers, *fuck* that's going to feel incredible. Hannibal squeezes Will's flanks and moans and arches his back even more. Like it's the best sensation in the world. Will has to fight not to replace his fingers right away with his cock.

This is really happening.

After a few more minutes of slow, deliberate fingering, Will increases the speed of his thrusts, still angling for Hannibal's prostate. He concentrates on matching the pace of his right hand in Hannibal's ass with that of his left on Hannibal's cock. Hannibal gets his attention by squeezing his sides hard enough to bruise. Hannibal's face is contorted when Will looks up. Will puts Hannibal's expression together with the spasming muscles around his fingers and realizes Hannibal is fighting not to come.

"Too much," Hannibal chokes.

Will slows down and changes the angle. He knows he's done the right thing when Hannibal's face turns rapturous again, eyebrows raised, eyes closed, lips slightly parted. Will would finger him all night just to see that face again and again and again.

But he's got to feel Hannibal with a more sensitive organ.

He withdraws his fingers and with eager, shaking hands, he tears into the foil, slides the thin sheath of latex on, and pinches the air out of the tip. Hannibal drizzles lube on him and strokes him to distribute it. Will growls between quick, harsh breaths and holds the base of his dick so he's still and upright. He watches carefully, hoping this isn't some dream he's about to wake up from, as Hannibal slides down onto him.

Oh. This is real.

Pleasure shoots through his body, tightening his chest until he can hardly breathe. The tight heat encasing him is almost too much. Will groans and uses every ounce of his control to stop himself from thrusting up. That's what he's supposed to do, he knows, but he just wants to hold still and feel the heat around him. It's been so long. Being inside Hannibal feels so amazingly good and right.

Hannibal slides down further and Will feels some resistance, then more tight heat and he's buried as deeply as he can be. His eyes squeeze shut and harsh breaths fall from his open mouth because it feels *so damn good*.

Hannibal remains still, waiting for him to adjust to the sensation. Several seconds tick by before Will has the presence of mind to grasp Hannibal's hips to let him know he's ready for more.

Hannibal's knowing smile says Will hasn't felt anything yet. He squeezes his muscles around Will. Will gasps and digs his nails into Hannibal's hips. Hannibal is going to destroy him.

When Hannibal finally does lift himself up and nearly off of Will's cock before sliding back down, the condom's barrier is the only thing that keeps Will from coming. He hears someone having an obscenely good time over the roar of blood in his ears. Will desperately wants to buck up into Hannibal, to fuck him properly; his muscles strain with tension, begging him to cant his hips. But he knows he won't last when he does, so he makes himself stay still.

Hannibal seems to understand. Slowly, he starts riding Will, clenching his muscles as he pulls up and shoving Will deep inside on the way down. Will keeps his eyes closed and his head tilted back, unable to respond in any other way to the sensation.

Hannibal goes slowly to allow Will to adjust. Will forces himself to take deep breaths. He opens his eyes. The sight of Hannibal, flushed and disheveled, fucking himself with Will's cock makes the world go crimson. He gasps and just manages to pull himself back, closing his eyes and returning his focus to the sensation. Nothing exists outside of the slick heat sliding and squeezing with perfect force.

After a while, Will regains control. With the lazy confidence of an alpha male, he watches the motion of Hannibal's hips and the pleased glint in his eyes. He smiles. Hannibal smiles, too,

and squeezes Will's chest, his thumbs pressing Will's nipples. Will sees Hannibal decide that he can take more. He takes a deep breath and tightens his hold on himself as Hannibal quickens the pace.

Hannibal slams againt Will fast enough to satisfy himself but not so fast that Will loses what little control he has. Will keeps himself in check, just barely, as he relishes the sight of Hannibal pleasuring himself. The tiny part of Will's brain not overwhelmed with sensation is impressed with Hannibal's ability to maintain control even as he throws his head back and moans. This is rougher and more intense sex than any Will has had before, and he hasn't even moved yet. Hannibal's strength exceeds his own; if he didn't trust Hannibal implicitly, he'd be intimidated by a strong man impaling himself on his most delicate parts. Instead, the sight of Hannibal, naked and powerful, working himself into a frenzy on Will's cock may the be the most beautiful thing Will has ever seen.

Their bodies collide steadily for what seems like a very long time and no time at all. Will has the opportunity to study every inch of him, to watch his muscles expand and contract as he keeps his weight centered. He's in exceptional shape. How does he do it? Will's eyes travel up from Hannibal's taut cock to his abs and pecs and up from there to his face where he's still lost in pleasure. Will closes his eyes again and concentrates on the sensation. Hot and tight and *perfect*.

Hannibal dips into a slow, sensuous thrust, and keeps Will buried. His mouth quirks when Will opens his eyes.

"You can move, too, you know."

Will squirms.

"I'm not gonna last when I do."

Hannibal bends down to claim his lips. The movement nearly lifts him off of Will. Will slides his heels up to raise his legs, not caring that one of them hurts like hell, and thrusts up for the first time. A plaintive groan breaks over him, stifled by Hannibal's mouth. He doesn't ever want to leave Hannibal's warmth. It's more than safety, more than a sheath for his sensitive sex: it's completion. Hannibal's kisses turn him into one big throbbing nerve. He can't stop another groan. The thought of being inside Hannibal, the thought that Hannibal wants to be fucked by him, to be completed by him – it's so outrageously erotic that he makes a filthy noise into Hannibal's hungry mouth.

When Hannibal pulls back, he looks trashed: lips slick and red, hair ruffled, eyes gleaming. Sweat glistens on his body. Blood stiffens his cock. He looks like a man who's just been fucked and who wants to be fucked again.

Hannibal licks his lips, still breathing fast.

"I want to see you come, Will."

Will groans a curse and thrusts hard into him, ignoring his leg. Hannibal straightens up to give Will easier access, then adjusts until Will hits him at the right angle. He stays still, bent

forward slightly, his hands on Will's chest to keep himself in position, and he's *gone*.

Will pumps into Hannibal with rude abandon, as hard as he can, then harder still, his entire body straining with effort.

Will watches Hannibal's orgasm build, his face contorting, mouth open in desperation. His eyes shift down and he watches himself thrust in and out of Hannibal. It's too much. He closes his eyes and fights the incoming tide of pleasure, doing everything he can to keep it from crashing down on him. He wants Hannibal to come first. He wants to watch Hannibal's face as he comes. He says as much. Their groans and curses fill the air as Hannibal gets closer and Will battles.

Will chokes out a warning when he can't hold off any longer. He watches with urgent delight as Hannibal grabs his own cock and fists himself fast and hard. Hannibal shouts when he comes, his muscles spasming around Will, drawing him in further. Will never thought seeing someone else come would do so much for him. He lets go and pumps with everything he has until his own orgasm rips through him and he spills himself deep inside Hannibal.

When the white hot waves fade and he starts coming down, all Will can think is that this is the most intense, perfect pleasure he's ever had. Hannibal, in a similar state, drops his head to Will's shoulder, his chest heaving. His warm breath moistens Will's clavicle. Will drapes a hand over the back of Hannibal's head and moves his hips so he stays buried for a moment longer as blood recedes from his spent dick.

Too sated to keep his hips up for long, Will relaxes and lets himself slide out. Hannibal rolls off of him and onto his back.

They lie next to each other and breathe and say nothing. Every atom in Will's body hums with satisfaction.

With a clumsy hand, Will removes the condom and wipes his dick and then his stomach with his shirt. Are all of his shirts going to wind up semen-stained? He throws the shirt toward the closet and barks a breathless laugh at the thought. His cock aches, slightly chaffed and overly sensitive. Hannibal seems equally affected. Pride swells in Will's chest at having satisfied his partner.

"That was incredible," Will murmurs, blinking lazily at the ceiling.

A little hum of agreement comes from his right.

Will breathes deeply, savoring the scent of sex. Five years. That's how long it's been. Five years since he had sex. And how long since he had someone like he just had Hannibal? Never. Never before has he had such mind-blowing sex.

Hannibal stirs next to him, propping himself up on an elbow. Will shifts his gaze to find Hannibal watching him through half-lidded eyes, looking perfectly pleased. Sated.

Hannibal bends down and kisses Will once, lightly on the lips. He runs a single gentle finger from Will's temple to his cheek.

“Goodnight, Will.”

Will’s mouth quirks. “Goodnight, Hannibal.”

He watches Hannibal slide off the bed and walk out the door, his ass and the tops of his legs red where Will’s hips slapped against him. Hannibal limps slightly. Now Will does smile. He did that to Hannibal. He’s the reason Hannibal will be sore in the morning.

Will shifts to his left so he’s out of the sweaty indention his body created. He sits up enough to arrange the covers around his legs and swallow a pill for his screaming muscles, then turns the lamp off and sighs with satisfaction as he drifts into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Fear is the Hand that Pulls Your Strings

Chapter Summary

Will has dinner with Hannibal to discuss Abel Gideon. Nightmares and smut. Set during "Entrée."

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all of the fantastic comments on the last chapter! Comments are like little treasures in my inbox. :)

Chapter title from Queens of the Stone Age, "Smooth Sailing"

After several days of hard work and physical therapy, Will goes home. A single night passes before he calls Hannibal about having dinner, and they fall quickly into a pattern of meeting for dinner and sex three or four times a week. Will returns to teaching and waits two more weeks to be cleared to return to the field. In that time, Hannibal teaches him how to make the most of each position as he regains strength and his healing leg allows them to do more.

Will is both an excellent student and a more considerate sex partner than Hannibal expected him to be. He generally prefers to leave afterward, mumbling about the dogs having accidents as though he needs to spare Hannibal's feelings.

With Will gone, Hannibal can restock his freezer in peace. The day after Will leaves, Hannibal tracks Robert Gafferty, the red-headed physical therapist who wouldn't listen, from the gym to his apartment. He goes down easily; as he's in good condition, Hannibal takes more than usual from him: heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and thighs. He drives the remains into Lake Fairfax Park near Wolf Trap and buries them. It's unlikely he will need the remains to be discovered, but just in case, he includes a fishing lure.

He won't need it, though; he's certain of that. When Will is ready to accept his true nature, he will realize what he already knows but hasn't acknowledged about them both: they are killers. There is no other identity.

In the meantime, Hannibal will continue to guide him. Groom him. Show him what he could have and who he could be if he accepts who he is. He had been progressing nicely, driven repeatedly to his emotional and psychological limits. Once his body turned on him, too, attacking his brain, he had begun to break through his boundaries. But that was all prior to his being shot. Hannibal's lip curls at the random act of violence; he's checked thoroughly with

Jack: zero leads. It's just as well. He doesn't particularly want to kill the hoodlum who shot Will. If anything, the kid should receive a reward for bringing Will so much closer to him. Being the key to Will's sexual satisfaction affords him so many more opportunities to study and mold Will.

A few days after Will is cleared for field work, Will calls him after lunch to see if he's free for dinner. Hannibal hears in Will's tense, wary, worn tone that he's been to a crime scene today – his first since being shot. Hannibal hears how much the visit took out of him; he agrees to dinner at 8 and tells Will not to work too hard. Will just laughs in the bitter, frantic way that means he's seen too much to turn back now.

Hannibal isn't surprised to find Will pale and drawn when he opens the door at 8. He smells on Will a low grade fever – enough to make him tired and uncomfortable, but not so much that he'll notice. The synthetic scent of too much aspirin burns his nose. Still, he smiles ever so slightly as he lets Will in.

There's a stumbling shuffle in Will's step as Will follows him to the kitchen. He'll be staying here tonight. He'll dream.

Hannibal's smile broadens.

Will trudges past two nearly thawed loin steaks, cut from the left thigh of Robert Gafferty, leaking rivulets of blood in the sink. He heads for the chair he's spent a great deal of time occupying in the past month. Though Will had been helping Hannibal prep the side dishes – even preparing a few himself under close supervision – and had seemed to enjoy it, he's far too weary now to do anything but sink heavily into the chair, pull his glasses off, and sigh.

"You look tired, Will," Hannibal observes as he washes arugula, red sails lettuce, and orange calendula flowers for the salad.

Will rubs a hand over his eyes: headache. "First day back in the field." His voice is rough. Used up. He tips his head back and closes his eyes. "It was a long one."

"Abel Gideon thinks he's the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal says, chopping Thumbelina carrots to sweeten the salad. "I would think that spells a long day."

Will raises his head, his eyes full of interest even as tiredness pinches their corners. The return to field work has sharpened his mind. He's lively in a way he hasn't really been since his injury. He sits up.

"How do you know about that?"

"Jack Crawford came to see me about his wife. Before he left, he said you were doing well." Hannibal stops chopping and appraises him critically. "I'm not sure I agree."

Will sits forward, placing his elbows on his knees and folding his hands together. "Did he tell you Gideon plagiarized the last murder by the Chesapeake Ripper? It was a violent piece of work but completely unoriginal."

Hannibal warms two pans for the steaks and another for portabellas and Vidalia onions.

“Will you eat a rare steak?”

Will blinks, unsure for a moment what Hannibal’s talking about, then shrugs. Hannibal lays the steaks in two ponds of melted butter.

“You spoke with Abel Gideon today?”

Will nods, his eyes sharpening again. He stares into the space near Hannibal’s hands as Hannibal plates the salads with crumbled goat cheese from a farm near Manassas and a drizzle of homemade vinaigrette.

“Why do you think he copied the murder?”

“Dr. Chilton at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane put him up to it.” Will enunciates the hospital’s name with acid, mocking vitriol. “Directly or indirectly, I don’t know. But somehow, he’s behind it.”

“Ah, yes, Dr. Chilton,” Hannibal says as he plates Hasselback potatoes, warm from the oven.

Will sniffs bitterly and rubs his eyes again. “He’d love to get his hands on me.”

Hannibal pauses before he spoons herbed sour cream onto the potatoes. He studies Will closely, making a show of doing something he doesn’t really need to do.

“It was difficult for you to go inside. Because of what you fear about yourself.”

Will nods tiredly, resting his head on his right hand and closing his eyes again.

Hannibal finishes the potatoes and sets the steaks aside to rest. He rounds the island and stops in front of Will, resting a hand lightly in his hair.

“You worked too hard today, Will.” Hannibal moves to Will’s side and runs his hand down to Will’s neck where he presses against tight, tense muscles. “You don’t look well.”

“I’ll be fine,” Will grumbles.

Hannibal hits a knot with both thumbs and Will hisses before his face slackens with relief. A tiny noise of pleasure escapes him. Hannibal takes his time working the knot out, massaging deep into the tissue. The scent of rare steak, complimented by the portabellas and onion, fills the room.

“Food will help,” Hannibal says when he’s smoothed away some of Will’s tension. He sweeps around to the steaks again. “If you would be so kind, Will, as to bring the Klinker Brick Zinfandel. First row, last one on the right.”

Will gets to his feet slowly and wobbles to the wine rack as Hannibal slides the steaks onto the center of the plates and rings them with mushrooms and onions. By the time he’s put the

final touches on the composition, Will has poured the wine and seated himself. He's fighting to keep his eyes open, but he perks up when he sees the full plate in front of him.

Hannibal takes his seat and watches Will devour half of the steak. He cuts meticulously into his own steak and savors the flesh. Will stops to catch his breath by way of sipping the wine like it's whiskey. Hannibal hasn't corrected his technique yet; some of Will's barbarisms must remain intact for him to continue to be himself. He's so much the crude American frontiersman with his dogs, his fishing, his little house in the woods; to teach him to enjoy wine properly would be to corrupt his coarse innocence.

"Did you eat lunch?" Hannibal asks as he slices another piece of steak. Blood, dense with hemoglobin, displaces the lighter fat of the butter into a fractal, so much like Will's mind when he spirals down into those dark, violent places. As he did today.

"We stopped on the way back to Quantico."

Hannibal doesn't pursue Will's non-answer. Will eats at a more leisurely pace now that he's taken the edge off of his hunger.

"How did this one treat you?" Hannibal asks.

Will tilts his head and swallows more wine. "It was so painstaking, so deliberate, yet so false."

"You called it plagiarism. What made it false?"

"The real Chesapeake Ripper would never repeat himself, for one." Will drinks deeply of the wine again. "I spent most of the day looking at the files. Each murder is a masterpiece. The statements are pure. Since he doesn't make mistakes, he doesn't need to repeat himself."

"You sound like you admire this killer, Will."

Will doesn't answer. A drop of blood and butter, pale pink against Will's skin, runs down his chin as he chews on another piece of steak. Hannibal stares at it without intending to, much more aroused than he planned to get tonight. Will isn't ready for his invitation yet. If Hannibal didn't know better, he would suspect Will of taunting him.

"I appreciate his work," Will says after he swallows. "In a way I don't think I'll ever be able to appreciate your cooking."

And with a swipe of the napkin, the trickle of juice is gone. Hannibal stares into Will's eyes. No trace of guile, mirth, or intention. Will looks away uncomfortably, unsure why he's suddenly the object of Hannibal's scrutiny. No, Will isn't ready yet.

"You have your talents," Hannibal notes, scenting the Zinfandel. "I have mine."

Will chases the remains of the potato onto his fork, scraping it clumsily against the plate. Exhaustion is catching up with him again. Though Hannibal would very much enjoy sex with Will tonight – he's come so far in the time they've spent together as lovers – it's clear Will

isn't up to it. It's just as well. Hannibal as a visit to pay to the vicinity of Jack Crawford's house tonight.

"Thanks for having me over on such short notice."

Hannibal smiles. Will's manners have come a long way, too.

"Over the phone, you sounded like you needed a good meal."

A wry smile tugs at Will's mouth. He looks down at table, self-conscious, nearly embarrassed. "You could tell."

Hannibal arranges the last of the salad on his fork.

"Your voice was strained."

Will sighs and spears the last bite of steak. "It was that kind of morning."

Hannibal inclines his head in understanding. He finishes his own steak and sits for a moment, savoring the combination of flavors. Will sits quietly, too, his mind elsewhere, his eyelids drooping.

How excellent that Will spent his day at a crime scene in an institution for the criminally insane, a place that terrifies him. How exquisite that Gideon copied the Wound Man murder for Will to see. How perfect that Will spent the rest of the day pouring over the case files on the other murders. It's as though Will has been looking through his portfolio all day, appreciating his work. Admiring it, too, though Will won't admit it. And how wonderful that he will sleep here tonight and his inflamed brain and overactive imagination will torment him with dreams that will offend his deepest sensibilities. Which composition will he see himself creating? One of Hannibal's or an original Will Graham?

The barest hint of a smile settles on Hannibal's lips.

"Dessert?"

Will blinks, startled, and then nods. Hannibal stands, collects his plate, and rounds the table for Will's. Will starts to push himself up.

"Stay, Will," Hannibal says, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You're nearly asleep as it is."

Will doesn't protest. He's learned to listen to Hannibal's opinion about his health. He takes up his wine glass again as Hannibal leaves the dinning room for the kitchen.

Will has refilled both of their glasses when Hannibal returns with two immaculately plated servings of white chocolate trifle with raspberries and almonds. Will waits for Hannibal to sit before he digs in, humming appreciatively. He savors a few bites before broaching a new subject.

"How do you know Chilton?"

Hannibal takes his time before he answers, enjoying the combination of textures and flavors.

“Through a former patient. He had a psychotic break. Murdered two people before he was discovered. Dr. Chilton and I consulted on his therapy once he was institutionalized.”

Will looks away and clears his throat. Hannibal counts three slow, deliberate breaths, in and out, calm and controlled, before Will speaks again.

“He wants to get inside my head,” Will says. He fidgets, his left hand making a fist, showing the anger he conceals. The corner of his mouth jerks in a wry smile. “Says I’m quite the topic of conversation in psychiatric circles.”

“Perhaps in some circles,” Hannibal replies evenly.

Will’s eyes skim Hannibal’s and glance off to a point over Hannibal’s shoulder. He rubs his thumb along his index finger, conflicted: angry at Chilton, emotionally exhausted by what he’s seen today, worried about himself, and trying to keep all of this inside because he thinks showing it will ruin Hannibal’s dessert. He’s been remarkably good at compartmentalizing the different aspects of their relationship. But it was inevitable, once Will returned to the field, that talk normally suited to the office would bleed into the dining room. How it will affect the bedroom, Hannibal doesn’t yet know.

Will’s eyes return tentatively to Hannibal’s. His voice carries a razor’s edge of anger when he speaks.

“Did you know about me before we met?”

Hannibal runs his fingers along the stem of the wine glass. “I had heard your name mentioned by colleagues with whom I have a little association. While not incurious, I was also not inclined to ask.”

Will raises his eyebrows and runs a hand along his chin. “Colleagues like Chilton?”

Hannibal inclines his head. Will nods, satisfied with the answer, and returns to his dessert.

When they’re finished, Will helps him carry the dishes to the sink and begins washing while Hannibal clears the kitchen island of ingredients. Will makes a considerable dent in the pile before a yawn he can’t suppress sneaks out.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

“Not at all,” Hannibal replies, drying the silverware. “I can finish up here.”

Will shakes his head as he yawns again. “No, this is good. Helps me decompress.”

“You’re staying here tonight,” Hannibal insists. “I won’t have you driving into a ditch.”

Will nods as he soaps a mixing bowl. His mouth quirks and Hannibal sees his thoughts turn to sex.

“If I’m staying here, I – ” Another yawn cuts him off. He shakes his head, trying to clear it, but succeeds only in making himself slightly dizzy. He takes a step back to catch himself.

Hannibal puts down the plate and towel, turns the water off, and takes the scrub brush from Will. He rests his other hand on Will’s shoulder.

“Go to bed, Will,” he says, leaning in close so he speaks into Will’s ear. “There’s always the morning.” A gentle squeeze encourages Will to listen and obey.

Will nods tiredly and dries his hands. He turns his head but Hannibal pulls back before he can try for a kiss.

“Is that a promise?”

By way of an answer, Hannibal nudges him toward the bedroom and pats his ass. Will sniffs a tired laugh and trudges out of the room, his hands already working on the buttons of his shirt.

“I’m holding you to that,” he calls over his shoulder.

Hannibal smiles as he turns the water back on and resumes washing. He turns his mind to Jack and ponders the best way to test his stability tonight.

When Hannibal returns from Jack’s house and peeks into the guest room, Will is in the throes of a nightmare. Curious, Hannibal enters and turns on the light. Will, too enmeshed in the dream, doesn’t respond to the stimulus. This isn’t the first one he’s had tonight judging by the mix of fresh and stale sweat amid the lingering scent of fever, the damp patches darkening his t-shirt, and the sheets twisted around his feet. His scar is livid against the pale flesh of his thigh.

Hannibal has seen him in so many vulnerable states since he was shot: shocked by the initial injury and the approach of the death; anguished over his sense of being diminished; fogged with fever; unhinged by hallucination; consumed by pain; exhausted by his deeply-felt emotions; lost in the explosion of orgasm. But Hannibal has not seen terror so fully in Will as he sees it now. The movie in Will’s head wrings every last vestige of control from him.

So this is what his empathy does to him when he opens himself to the violence of others and drops his guard to sleep. Hannibal has seen him sleep in many ways, too, from agitated to content, but he has not seen Will’s unconscious mind assault him before.

That’s what this is. An assault. Self-abuse.

Hannibal hears the timbre of Will’s terror change in his chest as his shallow intakes of breath go from short and sharp to staccato and panicked. He trembles from head to toe. Fight lost to flight; Will would be sprinting if his body didn’t have him paralyzed in REM sleep.

Perhaps he thinks he is sprinting. Hannibal counts a heart rate in the 140s. High blood pressure pulses painfully through the veins in his neck and arms. The patches of sweat under

his arms, on his chest, and around his neck have grown in the minutes Hannibal has stood watching him struggle.

Will has hidden his true nature so deeply from himself that his mind would rather tear itself apart than acknowledge who he is. It's a terribly sad thing – tragic, even – that Will denies his identity so thoroughly. Hannibal's chest clenches and his hand moves toward Will as if to touch those damp curls plastered onto his head in little hooks. Or his lips, parted slightly as when he makes love, now the passageway for fear.

Abruptly, the dream shifts and Will calms. Tension drains from his muscles. He sighs and his fingers and toes twitch as he returns to the second stage of sleep. Hannibal has long suspected Will of having sleep disorders in addition to somnambulism. Night terrors go hand-in-hand with it. An EEG would be invaluable right now. Instead, he will have to content himself with observing Will until his own need for sleep catches up with him.

Knowing he must have a plausible story, Hannibal repairs to his bedroom to undress. Once he's stripped to his undershirt and briefs, he slips a robe over his shoulders, ties it loosely, and ruffles his hair. He selects a neatly wrapped bundle that contains one of Will's outfits fresh from the cleaners. Some of them never went home with him when he left. Now, for every outfit he takes, another remains behind and joins Hannibal's laundry.

Hannibal smiles as he remembers Will coming into the kitchen one morning in the jade oxford that compliments his eyes, saying he'd been looking for that shirt for a week. Hannibal hadn't had to speak to let Will know how much he likes to see Will in that shirt. Will left flushed and half-hard for Quantico to teach and returned that night with a bottle of wine and the single-minded goal of fucking Hannibal senseless. He nearly did, but only because Hannibal let him. Will still needs another week or two of vigorous exercise, healthy food, and restful sleep before he's back to full strength.

Restful sleep he isn't getting tonight.

As Hannibal expected, Will skipped the deep stages of sleep and cycled back into REM. Another nightmare, just as intense as the last, has him tense and terrified when Hannibal returns. Hannibal sets the clothes aside and steps next to the bed. As long as Will continues to profile for Jack Crawford, he will sleep poorly – and he will continue to profile as long as he can. Hence, waking him now will not impede his progress toward self-awareness. Not waking him, on the other hand, sets back his physical recovery. The choice is obvious.

Hannibal leans over to place a light hand on Will's arm. He calls Will's name softly.

Will chokes on a gasp as his eyes snap open, still shuttling in rapid-eye movement for a second before he regains control. Will blinks and groans softly, his eyes flitting around the room.

Disorientation lingers for several seconds before Will abruptly sits up. Hannibal moves back to give him some space. Will rubs his eyes as his breathing returns to normal. He glances from Hannibal to the bedside table. No clock.

"What time is it?" he asks in a low, gravelly voice.

“Nearly 4 o’clock.”

Will sniffs and slides off of the bed to stand opposite Hannibal. Interesting. He has to put physical distance between himself and his terror; he prefers, too, to keep the bed between them. Will pulls his t-shirt over his head and drops it on the floor. His eyes are tired and haunted.

Will, realizing he’s without a shirt, wraps his arms around himself as though he doesn’t want to be seen this way. Of course he doesn’t. He’s still more confused than he should be. Not used to waking up disoriented and disheveled with another person around. The stares of his dogs don’t demand anything from him.

“Did I wake you up?” Will asks, rubbing his arms as the drying sweat on his skin chills him.

“No, I was up.” Hannibal looks away, feigning guilt. “I heard you.”

Will nods wearily. He seems to have accepted the situation, and he turns and walks toward the bathroom.

“I’m going to make some tea,” Hannibal says. “If you’d care to join me…”

Will doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to. Of course he will.

Ten minutes later, Will plods out of the back, wearing dry shorts and nothing else. He seats himself at the breakfast table and stares into space, still deep inside his own head.

Hannibal acknowledges him with a glance and returns to spooning loose leaf chamomile tea from the Nile Delta into the strainers of two Japanese tetsubin, black, with delicate herons wrought in the iron tops. The scent of spicy, woodsy soap – Will’s scent – wafts across the room. His wet hair confirms it: he took a shower. But not, Hannibal supposes, because he didn’t feel clean. No, Will showered because his nightmare made him self-conscious – and because he hopes to use Hannibal’s body to help him forget his fear.

When the water boils on the stove, Hannibal pours it over the tea and replaces the tops so it can steep. His movement brings Will back to reality.

“What were you doing up?” Will asks, his voice still low and rough. “If you don’t mind my asking,” he adds with a slight roll of his eyes.

Defensive. He’s putting his forts back up.

“Same dilemma,” Hannibal says, carrying the two pots to the table. “My patient under Dr. Chilton’s care. It’s a terrible thing, to fail a patient.”

Will rests his head in his hands, elbows on the table. “Psychotic break? How is that your fault?”

“I should have seen it coming.”

Will looks up sharply, his eyes intense, full of fear, and immediately looks away. Hannibal counts five respirations before Will speaks to the wall behind Hannibal's right shoulder.

“Do you see it coming in me?”

Hannibal watches him openly and counts three respirations before answering.

“I worry that I might.”

Hannibal pours tea into their shogun cups. Will takes his and blows at the steam and sips, eyes on the intricate pot.

“What you were you dreaming about?” Hannibal asks, sipping his tea as well.

“Don’t want to talk about it,” Will mumbles.

“It’s best to externalize if you can,” Hannibal advises.

Will glowers at him.

“We’re not in your office.”

“No, which is why I’m listening without analyzing.”

Will snorts. “You can’t turn it off.”

Hannibal shrugs. “I don’t have to share my observations.”

“No, you don’t,” Will agrees.

His face contorts into the twisted smile that appears when he’s trying not to cry. He takes a deep breath and gulps the tea, then pours another cup. He needs a few minutes and yet another cup of tea to calm down. The very air around him grows thick with tension.

“It-it was – I was – ”

Will stops and takes another deep breath. His eyes dart wildly around the table. His voice is frantic.

“Jeremy Olmstead. I was him, I was the Ripper, I was – ”

He lifts the cup with a shaking hand and drinks.

“ – with rebar and pliers. Screwdrivers. Every tool in his shop.”

Will’s eyes settle on the table in front of him. His voice shifts to monotone.

“Phillips head and flat head. Sixteen inches. Twelve inches. In the chest.”

He touches his bare chest unconsciously. In the exact locations. Hannibal replays the wounding of Jeremy Olmstead in his mind’s eye.

“Rebar. Twenty-four inches. Twenty inches. Chest.”

Will’s hands move into position perfectly each time. Absently, he drinks more tea. His right hand slips off the table and lands on his thigh.

“A panel saw. In his leg. Right leg.”

Sweat breaks out in earnest on his forehead. Two droplets roll down his face before he speaks again, his voice shaky and harsh.

“Another – another screwdriver. In the leg. Left – left leg. Lower.”

He gulps tea and gags, and for a moment, Hannibal thinks he’ll vomit, but he swallows heavily and continues.

“A foot of – metal sign post. In his thigh. Left thigh.”

He takes a deep, shuddering breath and looks up – not at Hannibal so much as through him. His voice wavers, nearly faltering.

“Like he was a pincushion. A Voodoo doll. Not human. I never saw him as human. Only as meat.”

With that, he’s finished. He rubs a shaking hand over his eyes, then wipes the sweat from his forehead and temples. He gulps more tea and stares at the table again, wrapping an arm around himself.

Hannibal wants him to go on, wants to hear more of what Will saw behind his closed eyes, to hear Will’s opinion of the work, but he said he would listen and not speak, and he’s holding himself to that. This time.

They drink in silence until Will’s head starts to droop, his eyes sliding closed.

Wordlessly, Hannibal encourages him to return to bed. He’s on his back, trying to sleep, when Hannibal, robe removed, joins him. He lies on his side on top of the duvet next to Will. Will opens his eyes and gazes sleepily at Hannibal.

“Roll onto your stomach.”

Will raises an eyebrow but does as he’s told. Hannibal pulls the covers down past Will’s ass, straddles him, and begins to rub his back, neck, shoulders, and scalp. Will sighs and relaxes in phases, his muscles losing tension as though he simply forgets about them. Hannibal keeps his hips up high enough that Will won’t feel the activity in his briefs. Every muscle Hannibal touches needs his long, even strokes. He massages Will for a good ten minutes, listening to his relaxed breathing and tiny noises of relief, wondering if he’ll fall asleep like this. At length, it’s clear he won’t. Not enough trust to sleep on his stomach.

Hannibal moves off of Will and Will rolls onto his back, half-hard in those grey cotton shorts he prefers. He looks at Hannibal through hooded eyes, silently asking for more.

When Hannibal pulls Will's shorts down and takes Will's cock in his mouth, he does it because Will responds so well to positive reinforcement – perhaps because he's received too little in his life. Will spoke about the Wound Man piece so perfectly, so exactly, letting Hannibal relive those moments of calculated violence. Will doesn't know that, of course; he will deduce that his reward comes from his openness about the nightmare, from talking about something he prefers to keep to himself.

Hannibal has learned, over the past weeks as they've come to know each other's sexual preferences, that Will craves touch. He may have spent a lifetime trying to stifle that craving, but touch is too deeply wired in brain and body for him to escape his need for it. So, as Hannibal lavishes attention on Will's cock, he also runs his hands up the flat plane of Will's stomach, lingering on the toned muscles there. Will's inferior rectus abdominis contracts when increased blood flow makes his cock twitch in Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal runs his hands to Will's obliques, feeling the flat, thin muscles overlaying the vulnerable space of the abdominal cavity, and then up to the calcium crests of his floating ribs. He watches Will's chest expand and contract as the vacuum of his lungs draws oxygen in and forces carbon dioxide out.

Hannibal has taken to drawing Will. Never in a way Will would recognize, of course. Rather, Hannibal draws him from neck to iliac crest, shading his muscle tone from memory. Will's hands present the greatest challenge, as they are uniquely his. A craftsman's hands. Hands amply capable of imposing a violent will on some lesser being. He has shown Will how intimate the licking and sucking of fingers can be as an act of foreplay. He's learning. Now, Will's fingers are in his hair, urging him to pick up his languid pace.

What Will has yet to appreciate is the way food, drink, and stress alter the taste of his semen. Hannibal can taste the rare steak and Zinfandel in the pre-come Will leaks periodically into his mouth. He can taste stress and fever, too, a mix of bitterness and sweetness that, on top of the savory elements of meat and wine, creates a flavor unique to this moment in Will's life. He will never taste quite this way again. Combined with the scent of soap he used when he showered – his scent – he is fully and completely himself in this moment.

It's achingly erotic. Hannibal exerts most of his control to keep his hands on Will's ribs instead of borrowing one to fist his own cock. He will, toward the end, when he has Will arching his back and fighting not to buck too forcefully into Hannibal's mouth. Will gets mildly upset when Hannibal doesn't come with him; his own pleasure is incomplete if it is not shared. It's another of his endearing traits.

Hannibal traces his hands up to Will's sternum and out to Will's nipples where he presses hard enough to hurt. Will rewards him with a sharp intake of breath and a light tug of his hair. He has learned not to be too insistent when Hannibal sucks his cock. He appreciates now the steady hum of pleasure he receives from leisurely fellatio; experience has taught him that Hannibal will give him the release he craves only when Hannibal is ready.

And so Hannibal sucks until Will squirms beneath him. He runs his teeth along the sensitive frenulum to make Will gasp, then works the head of Will's penis with his tongue and lips, licking and sucking. Finally, having satisfied his desire to taste Will thoroughly, Hannibal dips back down and swallows Will until his lips kiss Will's fur. Will stays absolutely still

until he encourages Will to buck lightly into his throat. Will is permitted to go fast so long as he is gentle.

Hannibal listens to Will get closer and closer to release, gasping and moaning as his body tenses. He pulls himself out of his briefs and starts his own strokes. When Will is very close, Hannibal pulls back so Will slides out of his throat and back into his mouth. He will not miss an opportunity to taste Will. He turns on the vacuum force of his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he sucks Will hard. Will writhes and curses but keeps his hips still, knowing that Hannibal prefers him not to move for this part.

When he finally lets go and floods Hannibal's mouth, it's obvious from the volume and concentrated flavor that Will has not touched himself since he and Hannibal last had sex a few days ago. Hannibal sucks him through his prolonged orgasm, holding the hot, flavorful substance in his mouth until Will's cock stops twitching. He releases Will, analyzing the taste, and swallows with some reluctance. The savory and bitter notes – wine and meat and stress – linger on his palate, augmented by the salty, umami base. Exquisite.

Will watches him through half-lidded eyes. He has no idea how delicious he is. Just that Hannibal very much enjoys the taste of him.

Hannibal squeezes Will's uninjured thigh as he works himself to completion, using the lingering flavor of Will and the memories of blood running down Will's chin from the steak and of Will describing Wound Man to push him over the edge. He comes with a shudder, spilling himself on his hand, his briefs, the duvet.

When he opens his eyes, Will is watching him with languid, satisfied eyes.

"We'll both sleep well now," Will murmurs.

"We will," Hannibal agrees as he backs off the bed and gets to his feet.

They exchange small, happy smiles and Will reaches over to the turn the lamp off. As he leaves the room, Hannibal hears Will roll onto a dry spot with a deeply satisfied sigh.

He stops in the bathroom to clean himself and seeks his own bed, sated and tired and immensely pleased. He falls asleep immediately and dreams of watching Will skewer Jeremy Olmstead with rebar and screwdrivers. Will needs no guidance: he is a natural. His composition wants for nothing, as careful and selective as it is violent. Blood flecks his face when he stabs Olmstead through the throat and nicks a vein. A single drop runs down his chin where Hannibal catches it, his face expressing pride in Will. Will returns his smile.

He is a beautiful killer. He is complete.

Cœur de L'Homme

Chapter Summary

In this episode fill for "Sorbet," we pick up with Will chasing the Ripper and end after Hannibal cleans up Devon Silvestri's mess. Will deals with the trauma of having nearly died.

Chapter Notes

This chapter went long enough that it's really two chapters. You're getting it as a single chapter because breaking it up would do bad things to the narrative unity. Bon appétit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will doesn't see Hannibal for a week while he works the Chesapeake Ripper case. Not only is he busy reading every report ever associated with the Ripper, from the mundane to the pedestrian to the downright boring, he's also got fresh crime scenes to visit. Worse, since they follow the Ripper's geographical pattern, they're all in the Baltimore area. It's as though the Ripper knows how sorely tempted he is to stop by unannounced at Hannibal's office or home. But Will has been too busy, and, not having slept well all week, too tired to schedule something with Hannibal. Knowing how Hannibal appreciates appointments, Will won't just drop in on him unannounced. That would be rude.

But riding to Baltimore almost every other day with Jack wears on him. Once, Jack drives him past Hannibal's office and Will wonders if it's Jack's way of asking whether he's been by to see Hannibal recently. Not because Jack knows about their new arrangement. Of course Jack doesn't know. Rather, he does it because even as he pushes Will too hard, Jack also worries about him. It was Jack, after all, who brought Hannibal in to begin with to keep Will grounded.

Will's mouth quirks. He might thank Jack for that sometime. Hannibal grounds him in a way no one else ever has. He's always been a live wire, running at too high a voltage; Hannibal is both insulation and conduction, giving him the safety he needs while also channeling his thinking in productive directions.

The handsome façade of Hannibal's building slides past and into the distance. Will doesn't look back. He won't give Jack the satisfaction.

Half an hour later, screams saturate the air as Will steps inside the Ripper's head for the fourth time in a week. For some time, he can't find the quiet place inside he needs to go on.

The Ripper's design is vicious, brutal, contemptuous, brilliant, artistic, and even, in a twisted way, beautiful. Beautiful to the degree that such an heinous act can be aesthetically pleasing and hence appreciated. But that move requires separating the act from the person, the savage beauty from the life ended. It's something the Ripper does easily – and something Will can never do.

He has nothing to offer Jack. Yes, it's the Ripper. It's elaborate and orchestrated, elegant and graceful. Revolting.

Will does his work, follows the meticulous collection of evidence until he's seen so much more than he ever wanted to see, and, when he starts falling asleep on his feet, goes and sits in the SUV on Jack's unspoken order. It bothers him deeply that he isn't contributing much to this case. Police work, not his insights, will catch the Ripper.

Christopher Ward's screams, still echoing in his mind, become Darrell Ledgerwood's. Will sees himself slicing into Ledgerwood's abdomen and removing a healthy spleen. Ledgerwood is still alive. Every scream, every breath between every scream, and each of the tortured sobs, gasps, and squeaks that follow fill Will with vitality. He pours that vitality into his art, crafting an aesthetic commentary on this hunk of meat in order to elevate him. Ledgerwood is so much greater in death than he ever could have been in life.

Will wakes with disgust churning in his stomach. The parking garage at Quantico. Jack's sideways glance: *we're here*.

It has to be Jack who'll catch the Ripper, Will thinks as he unbuckles his seatbelt and gets out of the car. He can't get as deep into the Ripper's head as he did with Hobbs. It's too dangerous. Since Hobbs, the line inside of him separating the act from the person has faded. Once made of reinforced steel, concrete, and rebar, it's now sand shifting in a wind storm. Sometimes he can't see it at all.

Standing behind Jack in the elevator, Will places a hand over his face, pressing down just hard enough to relieve the tension in his brow and soothe the ache behind his eyes. He catches himself falling asleep before he can sway; when the elevator reaches their floor, he goes straight for the coffee.

Some time later – he has no idea how much later – he's in his lecture hall, half-asleep, doing his best to study the reports about Christopher Ward as they come in. Motion catches his eye and he looks up to see Beverly Katz approaching the desk.

"Geez, Will, you look tired." She hands him what appears to be a sandwich he doesn't recall requesting. "Zeller thought you were part of the lunch run. Hope you like roast beef."

Will takes the sandwich, still a little confused, his mind skipping as he tries to transition from the details of the crime scene to live human interaction.

"I like roast beef just fine."

Bev gives him a half-pitying look that says he said something just different enough to be noticeable.

“Did you go home last night?”

Will’s eyes shift from her to the yellow legal pad on his desk. He stares at the blue lines running horizontally across the page, wondering what the answer is. He went home at some point. It was fairly recently. He’s sure of that much. But the way everything has begun to blur together, “recently” could be two or three days ago. The Ripper has kept him so busy that he hasn’t bothered to keep up with time as it’s measured by clocks and days and other human inventions not hardwired in his brain.

When he looks back at her, it’s clear that he’s taken too long to answer. She’ll tell Jack when she sees him. Fine. Whatever.

She sits on the desk as though invited to do so, getting closer to him than he allows most people to get. He leans back in the chair but doesn’t flinch.

“You’ve been holding up well,” she says with her critical yet understanding look. She’s been a surprisingly good person to be around. No bullshit with her.

“I guess,” Will says, rubbing his eyes. The sandwich is warm. He can smell the meat. His stomach growls and suddenly he’s ravenous; he realizes he’s not sure when he last ate.

Bev looks at him with complete honesty. With her, he doesn’t mind the eye contact. “The Ripper has been doing this for a long time. Sure, some people expect you to catch him. You’ve caught all the others. But he’s not like everyone else.”

Will shuts his eyes and nods. “He’s so careful.”

“We haven’t found anything,” Bev commiserates. “*Anything*.”

A smile tugs at Will’s lip. She’s just as frustrated as he is. Knowing that makes him feel better. For the first time in days, he feels like the pressure isn’t all on him.

“You’ll find something,” he says with a small but genuine smile.

Katz returns his smile. “Only if you don’t beat us to it.”

And with that, she’s gone. He appreciates her vote of confidence as he tears open the sandwich and devours it. He returns to the most recent set of forensics on Ward, trying not to spill au jus on the paper.

Several hours later, Jack shakes him awake. Initially, he has no idea how much time has passed. All he can do is stare at the crumpled sandwich wrapper as his dreams fade into memory.

“He never kills two nights in a row,” Jack says, also sitting on the desk.

What is it with people sitting on the desk today?

“Not even at this accelerated pace. Go home, Will.”

He must nod or make some other gesture of acknowledgement because Jack looks satisfied and leaves without further ado. Mechanically, Will packs his things, walks to the parking lot, and drives toward Wolf Trap.

His overworked mind, seeking solace, wanders to Hannibal. He wonders what Hannibal is doing right now. Will glances at the clock in the dashboard: 7:06. Still at the office if he's having a late session. Otherwise, at home, probably prepping raw ingredients for dinner. Or, if he had to pick up a few things, at the market and then home and dinner.

Will muses that if he weren't worn out, if the dogs didn't need to be fed, if it wouldn't be an intrusion, he'd calculate the best route to Hannibal's house from here. But he is and they do and it would be. When it comes to interacting with people, excuses have always been easy to find. Even if it's Hannibal. Hannibal, with whom he's had tremendous sex frequently in the past month or so. Hannibal, who sees his antisocial tendencies, his anger, his fear, his ugliness, his instability, who sees every terrible, unattractive detail about him, and who still, somehow, wants to see him. Who's taught him so much about pleasure. Who's become intimate with him without changing the fundamental nature of their relationship. Who's a sort of friend before he's a psychiatrist or a lover.

Am I your psychiatrist or are we having conversations?

Will recalls the departure from their routine at last week's appointment. The glass of wine. Because Hannibal had seen his own psychiatrist before he'd seen Will. Does Hannibal talk about him with his psychiatrist? Is it narcissistic to think so or naïve to think not? Truthfully, he doesn't want to think about it all. The notion that Hannibal has a psychiatrist troubles him for some reason, but he hasn't had room in his head, much less the time, to think about Hannibal having a psychiatrist. Moreover, if he's going to think about Hannibal, he'd prefer to think about him in a different way.

The car tires chew up asphalt as the yellow dividing line zips past; Will zones out, staring blankly at the taillights of the car ahead of him.

When his mind comes back online, he's ten minutes from home and still thinking about Hannibal. There's something special between them that Will can't put a name to. He's not always good at reading motive and intention when the situation isn't forensic. All he knows is that the thing he has with Hannibal feels right and for once in his life, he doesn't want to ruin something by thinking too much about it.

He thinks instead about the last appointment. About finishing the glass of wine with Hannibal. About staring at him for some time, his mind blank. Then Hannibal asking if he'd like to have dinner.

"What, now?" Will asked.

"In twenty minutes when your hour is up."

Will narrowed his eyes, considering the situation. The two empty wine glasses. "I don't think I have anything else to discuss. Now is good."

Then they'd exchanged smiles and the evening's trajectory was set. Will followed Hannibal home, wondering just how appropriate it was to go from having a conversation with his psychiatrist to making dinner with his friend to sleeping with his lover, all without changing the person behind the roles. He quickly decided that he cared not a whit about the answer.

Hannibal had him washing Brussels sprouts, which he thought he hated, and slicing butternut squash, which he'd never heard of before.

"I'm having a dinner party," Hannibal said. "Next Saturday at 8 o'clock. I'd be delighted if you would join me."

Will's knife stilled over the squash. "Dinner party," he echoed, shifting his weight. Hannibal glanced up at him from the meat he was preparing. Will returned to chopping. "I'm not exactly dinner party material."

"You could be."

The glimmer of hope in Hannibal's voice made Will feel bad about having to say no. He sipped his wine before answering. The more liquid courage, the better.

"I have to pass. I appreciate the invitation, but I'm not the party type."

"You are the dinner type, though, I'm happy to say."

And Hannibal had given him a smile that said all was forgiven. Later, when the food was eaten and the dishes washed and put away, Will fucked him over the back of the leather couch in the library, sweetly at first and then hard and fast until Hannibal came with a breathless moan that sent Will over the edge.

Sitting in the car, one turn away from home, Will rubs himself through his khakis. He's been too busy to take himself in hand since that night. A week ago? Maybe more than that. Will isn't sure what day it is. Thursday? Something like that. He saw Hannibal last Wednesday.

The last time he was home, his nightmares took a pleasurable turn and he woke up sticky from the first wet dream he's had since he was a teenager. That feels like a few days ago.

Shit, the dogs. If the dogs haven't torn up the house completely in his absence, he's going to owe his neighbor a cord of firewood. He realizes it's been too long since he gave the dogs any thought: it *has* been a few days since he's been home. Probably closer to three than two. Shit.

The dogs are boisterous when he opens the door, forgetting their discipline and piling out onto the porch and into the yard. He doesn't even try to go inside the darkened house. Winston and Ella stay with him on the porch while the others run to the tree, some finding a bathroom spot, others running for the sake of running.

Will stands in the sallow illumination of the porch light, watching the dogs play, and smiles. Winston nudges his hand. He squats to scratch Winston and Ella behind the ears, their fur warm and soft under his fingers. They whine happily, filling his nose with terrible breath that

he minds not at all. Winston wants to lick him. Will allows it, and when Winston snuffles against his cheek, the tension in his mind and body snaps like a cord held too long at its breaking point. He falls onto the porch with a sigh and, wincing, stretches his legs out in front of him. He hasn't kept up with the exercises for his leg. He pats his jacket for the aspirin bottle and swallows two. Winston licks him again and he smiles through the pain, suddenly aware that he's reached the drunken, goofy stage of exhaustion.

Will allows himself five minutes pure, simple canine interaction. Their happiness amplifies his emotions own until he feels happy himself. More than happy. Loved. Loved in the uncomplicated way only animals can love. He closes his eyes, sighs, and lets the feeling wash over him like waves on a summer day in the Gulf.

Eventually and with not a little reluctance, Will gets to his feet with and ventures into the house. The scent of unwashed dog wafts from the door. All seven need baths. Winston and Ella follow him inside where he nearly trips on their toys as he finds the light switch. Light floods the room and he sees less chaos than he expected. He owes his neighbor two cords of wood.

Will contents himself with the simplicity of domestic chores, tossing a frozen dinner in the microwave, putting food out for the dogs, and tidying the worst of their messes. If he weren't running on fumes, he'd consider cooking something. He's learned enough from Hannibal to prepare complex meals for himself.

Not tonight, though. All he wants to do is spend a little more time with the dogs, eat something, jerk off, and pass out. Maybe not even jerk off. He has an appointment with Hannibal tomorrow evening and he likes the extra boost he gets when he waits a few days. He doesn't want to wake up sticky again, but he's so damn tired and his leg hurts and his inability to contribute more to the case makes him feel impotent. And he'd much rather wait. He'll risk it.

He calls the dogs inside, eats while they eat, and sits on the floor in the middle of their beds, rubbing the heads and backs of everyone who comes near, dodging the thwacks of happy tails. He nearly nods off on the floor a few times before he struggles to his feet, turns out the lights, strips to his underclothes, and lies down with a sigh. Closing his eyes, he listens as the dogs settle into their beds for the night, and soon he's asleep. It's not quite 9 p.m.

The Ripper doesn't let him sleep for long. Scream-laced nightmares tear him from sleep again and again. He goes through three shirts and two pairs of shorts, and at 6:30, he gives up. The dogs go out while he brews a miserable excuse for coffee and microwaves another frozen dinner. A trip to the grocery store is long overdue.

He's at Quantico by 8:30, pouring over the reports produced overnight by the unit's many forensic scientists on Christopher Ward. Nothing new, nothing that will help him do his job. Class passes in a blur. If asked later in the day, he wouldn't be able to recall exactly what he'd said to the students. It's Price who brings him lunch and reassurance this time. Price has the good grace not to pretend Zeller put him on the list by accident. Will hands over a ten dollar bill, somewhat surprised that he has cash in his wallet. Another item there catches his attention and he flushes and hopes Price doesn't notice.

After lunch and a cup of the strongest coffee he can find, Will pulls out all of the crime scene photos he has and piles them on his desk. Their brutality assaults him; he reels, hearing the screams that rent his sleep, his right hand mimicking the surgical cuts, his left the vicious stabs. He's locked inside experiences that aren't his when Jack checks on him.

Will isn't fully cognizant of what he says to Jack. All he knows is that Jack leaves and he can return every ounce of his energy and focus to the case. Hours pass in a steady stream of mutilation, artistry, and feelings so intense that he can't move without tipping the knot of nausea in his stomach. Blood roars in his ears, sometimes drowning out the screams, sometimes not. His unwillingness to lose focus prevents him from seeking out more coffee. When he finally does to get up to use the restroom, the walls ripple around him. He stares at the floor as it slides by beneath his improbably real shoes and threatens to rise up to punch him in the nose. Other people slip by him like shades. The water he sips from the fountain next to the men's room tastes coppery and fearful. He forces himself to drink so he can swallow more aspirin.

Back at his desk, he sits forward, elbows on the desktop, and cradles his head with both hands. He doesn't remember what it feels like to not have a headache. His watch tells him he needs to leave for Baltimore in an hour. He's got to figure out how to climb back to the surface of reality so he can function, so he can get to Hannibal's office. But everything swims in front of his vision as though he's trapped in a swimming pool a foot below the water's surface. Light scatters, refracted by water. The chemical stink of chlorine reminds him of cleaning blood stains off of floors, its presence a signal of violence erased but never really gone.

He's in Abigail's house with her and Hannibal, watching her absorb the scene of her near death. Chlorine tingles his nose. He wonders if Abigail smells it, too, and thinks of her blood spilled and then wiped away, rendered meaningless, consigned to memory. His hands shake, hot and sticky with her blood.

You be my dad.

She sounds happy when she says it. *Yes*, he answers in his mind, and a vision of himself teaching her to fly fish unfurls. She smiles when she casts perfectly and the fly lands on the water. An enormous trout hits it.

"Set the hook, Abigail! Yes! Reel it in!"

He waits with the net and scoops the magnificent fish from the water. She beams at him and he looks on her with all the paternal pride never showered on him. Passing this skill on to her, watching her execute it perfectly, being the object of her daughterly adoration: fulfillment.

Later, they sit across from each other while tree frogs sing a summer chorus at the edge of a field. Cassie Boyle, impaled on the stag's head, is nearby but unobtrusive. Her sacrifice brought them together, father and daughter, in this moment of shared familial bliss. Even as storm clouds gather overhead and wind rustles the trees, he feels such peace and stillness. The world could end at this moment and he would go willingly, happily, into the night.

"It's better that it's just the two of us."

She smiles. Happy. Perfect. He doesn't need to speak to agree. She knows he agrees.

She hears something. Her expression turns troubled.

"Dad?"

How right to hear her call him Dad.

"Yes?"

"There's someone else here."

The tranquil scene dissolves as Hannibal calls his name. The lecture hall replaces the field and he feels his eyes cease their back and forth movement and return to his control.

Hannibal in his handsome blue suit, set off by the pale yellow shirt and slightly ostentatious tie.

"I have a twenty-four hour cancelation policy."

The bottom falls out of Will's stomach as he realizes what's happened. "What time is it?"

"Nearly 9 o'clock."

Shit. His eyes feel gritty, like he's been caught in a sandstorm. He rubs his face with both hands, trying to clear away the clinging sensation of sleep. He apologizes – unnecessarily, Hannibal says, but no, it's necessary.

"I must have fallen asleep," he says, more to himself than to Hannibal. He doesn't remember intending to sleep. He doesn't remember much of anything from the day that isn't unbearably violent, yet the peace of his dream keeps him calm. It was so vivid. So real.

"Was I sleepwalking?"

"Your eyes were open, but you were not present."

Shit. Not only did he miss their appointment and worry Hannibal – because why else would he have driven all the way from Baltimore – now he's got another bizarre sleep problem. Sleeping with his eyes open. Is that even possible? Was his dream actually a hallucination? Is he hallucinating now?

Will presses against the headache pounding his skull hard enough to vibrate the bones and fissures.

"Felt as if I was asleep," he says. "Need to stop sleeping all together. Best way to avoid bad dreams."

Hannibal's attention shifts away from him, thankfully, and to the photos piled on his desk. "Well, I can see why you have bad dreams."

Will rises from the chair. He can't miss the chance to get Hannibal's perspective. Not when Hannibal has been so helpful.

"What do you see, doctor?"

Will taps the desktop with two fingers, then a knuckle, eager to hear Hannibal's assessment but a little nervous because he doesn't deserve the help.

"Sum up the Ripper in so many words."

It's a herculean task. "Choose them wisely."

"Oh, I always do. Words are living things. They have personality. Point of view. Agenda."

Will looks at him, again marveling at the depth of Hannibal's understanding. He files Hannibal's comment away, though he didn't need Hannibal to tell him that he chooses his words wisely. It's one of those similarities they share that makes it so easy for Will to interact with him.

"They're pack hunters," Will adds, turning vicious for a moment as he imagines words chasing, nipping, biting, and ripping the throats out of unsuspecting interlocutors.

Hannibal's focus shifts to the photographs.

"Displaying one's enemy after death has its appeal in many cultures."

Hannibal always opens with a statement that's broadly true but misses the specifics.

"These aren't the Ripper's enemies," Will clarifies. "These are pests he's swatted."

"The reward for their cruelty."

The vowels of *cruelty* roll off of Hannibal's tongue. Personality. Point of view. Agenda. But not the Ripper's.

"He doesn't have a problem with cruelty," Will corrects. "The reward is for undignified behavior. These dissections are to disgrace them. It's a public shaming."

"Takes their organs away because in his mind they don't deserve them."

Will nods, surprised by how perceptive Hannibal is, though he shouldn't be surprised. Where Hannibal's insight into such darkness comes from is a mystery to him. He hasn't wanted to pry into Hannibal's past, but there's got to be more to it than an academic understanding of evil.

Will straightens up and backs away, wandering over to the chair. Hannibal is kind to indulge him, to help him with this case – and was even kinder to drive all the way down here to check on him.

Hannibal selects the one photo that doesn't fit with the rest: Miriam Lass's arm. Like Will, he excels at finding patterns and anomalies.

"What's this?" he asks.

"That's Jack Crawford's trainee," Will supplies. "She's not like the other victims. The Ripper had no reason to humiliate Miriam Lass."

Miriam Lass would be a puzzle if the Ripper's intentions with Jack weren't so clear.

"Seems to me he was humiliating someone," Hannibal remarks.

"He was humiliating Jack."

"Did it work?"

"I'd say it worked really well."

Hannibal puts the photo of Miriam Lass's arm down and works his way around the desk, taking up a photo here and there. Will walks to the edge of the platform on which the seats rest, his back turned to Hannibal. His quadriceps pulls painfully when he takes each step, and the dull ache he felt earlier in the day ratchets up to an incessant throbbing as blood fills the muscles. The pounding in his head syncs with that in his thigh, driven by each beat of his heart. He shakes two more aspirin out of the bottle.

"You've been studying these photos all day."

"More or less."

Hannibal has gone to the other side of the desk, still immersed in the photos, working his way toward the legal pads on which Will was taking notes earlier. Will takes the long way around the desk so he can see if Hannibal has rearranged anything. A few photos are stacked: Hannibal has imposed a modicum of order on his chaos. He fans them out, sees that they're of the same victims, then stacks them again. Nothing grabs his attention; he comes to rest on Hannibal's right.

Hannibal glances at him. "Have you found anything?"

Will rubs both hands over his face again, trying to banish the tired ache in his bones.

"Nothing I can use. Nothing I didn't already know."

"And yet you continue to try."

"Have to do something."

"Must be frustrating."

Will sighs. "That's not even the half of it. I keep hearing their screams. When I close my eyes _ "

“Will, there you are.” Jack. Jack and Bev. “And Dr. Lecter, what a surprise. We have a lead. Would you care to help us catch the Ripper?”

“How could I refuse,” Hannibal replies.

Will spares half a moment to grab his jacket and he and Hannibal follow Jack and Bev to the parking garage. Jack fills them in on the way: private ambulance as a mobile operating room and perfect way to blend in with police. Hiding in plain sight.

“Knew you’d find something,” Will says to Bev with a smile.

Jack wants Will to ride with him – huge surprise there. Will tries not to look forlorn as Hannibal leaves them for his car. They’ll meet up at the private ambulance company in Baltimore. Will listens as Jack and Bev discuss their plans. He doesn’t remember falling asleep and is surprised when Jack wakes him up outside the ambulance garage.

Will stays back with Hannibal, doing his best not to limp. His nap served only to make him more tired. Bev has yet another smart tidbit about GPS tracking and soon they’re on their way to the Baltimore Police Department’s Central District to run the sweep and coordinate with a SWAT platoon. Hannibal seems enthralled by the drama of rolling out with the SWAT team. Will is glad that he didn’t drive all the way to Quantico for nothing.

This all feels too easy, though. Using a private ambulance is smart but not cunning. It doesn’t feel like the Ripper, just as the kill in the hotel didn’t feel like the Ripper. Not theatrical enough. No flair. No artistry. Too practical.

And so Will doesn’t feel the same adrenaline rush that propels Jack and Bev out of the unmarked police car. He’s not sure he has any adrenaline left at this point, anyway. Hannibal, as an observer, remains in the background with Will. They watch the SWAT team pry the door open and Jack point his shotgun at the man inside.

Then Jack calls for Hannibal and the air around Will turns frigid. He watches numbly as Hannibal climbs into the ambulance, removes his jacket, and feels around in the patient’s body with a gloved hand. The action of Silvestri stepping out of the ambulance and Jack and the SWAT team swinging to the side door to arrest him funnels away.

No, this isn’t a Ripper kill. Silvestri isn’t the Ripper.

Those thoughts float above his head like balloons. He’s anchored to the pavement, watching Hannibal keep the patient alive with a single hand, and suddenly he’s lying on the concrete behind Hannibal’s office, the gunshot still ringing in his ears. His left hand jerks over the scar hidden by his corduroys. Pain flares in his leg, but he’s too numb to feel it.

He smells blood, his blood, too much blood. Warmth tingles at his back. Blood spreading out beneath him, soaking through his clothes. He hears himself panting, gasping, moaning, hears his own mortal terror. Smells Hannibal’s cologne in his jacket, feels Hannibal’s hand on his neck, hears Hannibal telling him stay with him, feels himself fading away.

It’s the same peace he felt when he dreamed of Abigail calling him Dad.

It’s death’s warm welcome.

Will stands and stares and does not move as Hannibal holds the clamp on the patient’s renal artery. Hannibal sees in Will’s eyes that he is deep inside his own head, remembering – reliving – the night he was shot. Though he looks shell-shocked, and indeed does have a clinical subtype of post-traumatic stress disorder, what Hannibal sees is his empathy at work. It has placed him in a dissociative state. Though Hannibal has not seen him enter his famed dissociative state at a crime scene, Will’s eyes tell Hannibal that this is a version of it. The fact that Will steps closer, that he watches so intently, even though he’s not fully present in the moment fascinates Hannibal. Unlike Alana Bloom, Hannibal has no reason to avoid a study of Will. Indeed, he would not have spent so much time on Will if he weren’t so intrigued by both the neuroses and the man himself. It’s only a pity that Hannibal cannot more openly watch him stare at the patient.

Will stands unmoving as Silvestri is led off in handcuffs and a forensics team paces in the background, waiting for the patient to be taken away so they can do their work. Hannibal watches as closely as he can given that he’s holding a clamp on a man’s renal artery. What will bring Will out of his state? How will he react to the transition? Hannibal suspects Jack will be the catalyst for Will’s shift – and a few minutes later, he is.

Jack stops next to Will and leans in. He exchanges a look with Hannibal that says he’s not entirely sure what’s going on with his best pony and that Hannibal needs to tell him if there’s a problem. It’s a curious moral calculus Jack makes, valuing the lives of others over Will’s sanity and health. Though Jack is the God of his universe, his protection does not always extend to Will.

Jack looks back to Will. “Is it him?”

A few seconds tick by before Will steps back into the moment. Hannibal sees him half-blink, his eyes rolling back into his head for a fraction of a second: a change in perception. Will takes a deep breath and answers.

“No.”

Jack’s jaw muscles jump out on his face. “You’re sure?”

Will blinks and his eyes slide over to Jack without a turn of his head. “Absolutely.”

Will does not hold his gaze, but Jack appears convinced. Jack looks to Hannibal again, acknowledging that Will hasn’t worked through the trauma of his near-death experience yet, and silently asks Hannibal to fix it. Hannibal agrees.

God smiles on Will tonight.

As Jack leaves, Hannibal’s gaze returns to Will. He’s still in the present but only just so. He stares at the patient as openly as he did before, but his eyes say that he isn’t empathizing or hallucinating. Rather, as Hannibal noticed in Will’s lecture hall nearly two hours ago, Will is absolutely exhausted. He hasn’t slept well in many days. While Hannibal regrets none of his

actions, he does regret that they've done this to Will. Even if it's really Will who does it to himself. Will, who enslaves himself to others: feeling what they do instead of what he feels, catering to their needs first, valuing their lives above his own. By Hannibal's definition, what Will subjects himself to, what Jack Crawford puts him through – those actions merit the label of criminal.

Another ambulance arrives and one of the paramedics leads Will away. Hannibal, too focused on handing the patient over the paramedics, loses track of him.

Once Hannibal has fulfilled his obligation, he finds Will, shock blanket draped over his shoulders, standing next to the unmarked car they took to the scene from the Baltimore Police Department. Flashing red and blue lights illuminate his vacant, haggard face. Will climbs into the passenger's side on his own but has to be told to buckle his seatbelt. Hannibal drives them to the police station to collect his car and then straight to his house. Will's eyes remain fixed on some distant point on the horizon; he doesn't say a word. Hannibal recalls a conversation they had on the night Will hurt himself while sleepwalking.

You haven't said much about what you do remember.

That's because I don't want to remember what I remember.

Freud may have been wrong about a number of things, but he was right about the return of the repressed. Will must come to terms with having nearly died if he is to go forward.

Will's breath frosts the air as he follows Hannibal to the door. Hannibal steps aside to let Will enter first: he plods forward like an automaton. Hannibal would not be surprised if he doesn't know where he is.

Will shrugs his jacket off and turns to face Hannibal. Hannibal closes the door and sets the keys on the foyer table, then meets Will's gaze.

Something in Will's eyes tilts – falls – smashes. His gaze turns predatory for an instant before he closes the distance between them in a near run. He slams Hannibal against the door and, before Hannibal can push back, roughly claims Hannibal's mouth. Will kisses with absolute abandon – sloppy, needy, holding nothing back. His lips, cold from the winter air, warm quickly and then scorch.

He shoves at Hannibal's jacket before Hannibal catches his wrists and takes over the job of undressing. Their hands bump together as Will unbuttons his shirt and Hannibal his vest. Will closes in several times to snatch greedy kisses, breathing in urgent, uneven gasps. Hannibal hears his own breath echo Will's. His fingers fly over the buttons of his lemon chiffon oxford as Will nearly rips his undershirt in the act of removing it.

In the time it takes them both to lose most of their clothes, Hannibal considers that, although Will is in no state for this, it would be wrong to miss this opportunity. Will is primal, bestial: responding to the reminder of death with an affirmation of life. Hannibal will not deny him that affirmation.

Will breaks away, grabs Hannibal's wrist, and tugs him toward the kitchen. He uses too much strength, nearly catching Hannibal off balance. Will pulls him past the refrigerator and to the end of the kitchen island. He stares at Hannibal for a single intense second before yanking a handful of Hannibal's undershirt and situating him between the island and Will's insistent hips. Will presses against Hannibal with all of his weight and kisses aggressively, pinning Hannibal in place. He grinds, hard as a rock through his corduroys. Hannibal's blood rushes south with dizzying force.

Will's intention could not be clearer: he will fuck Hannibal right here, right now. It would be vulgar, what they're about to do in this place of culinary art, if not for Will's animality. In this moment, Hannibal can refuse him nothing.

Will pulls away and crosses to the olive oil dispenser and back, his bearing in complete contrast to the slumped shoulders and drooping head Hannibal observed less than ten minutes ago. As Hannibal makes short work of his belt, trousers, and underwear, he can't help but be impressed: not only has Will overcome his physical limitations and the emotional turmoil of the past few hours, but his movements are deliberate, confident, calculated.

He's been planning this. Will Graham has been planning for him a hard, violent fuck.

A moan climbs out of Hannibal's throat of its own accord. He pushes up on one foot so he can sit on the cold metal of the island and slips his trousers over his shoes as delicately as he can given his decidedly indelicate state: flushed, panting, heart hammering, insistently hard, naked save for his shoes, which he quickly toes off. Will's careful consideration of this act, evident again in the wolfish gleam in his eye as he pulls a condom from his wallet, gets Hannibal harder than he's been in years. He closes his eyes and lets lust rage in his blood.

Will drops his pants, breathing through parted lips, dons the condom, and slicks himself with oil. They exchange an intense stare, a harbinger of the rough passion to come, as Will takes two steps forward to press his body against Hannibal's. Will pushes him down, nothing about him gentle, and, without warning, shoves two fingers into him. Hannibal moans more loudly than he intends as pain-tinged pleasure harmonizes in his blood. He pulls his knees to his chest to give Will easier access.

Will doesn't ask or pause: just stretches him roughly, removes his fingers, and rams his cock in so hard that a cry rips from Hannibal's throat. Dimly, he hears Will cry out, too. Hannibal grasps the edge of the island to hold himself in place as Will bucks into him as though his life depends on it. Hannibal adjusts his hips, and *there*, perfect. He tilts his head back and presses his body against the steel, urging Will to fuck him faster, harder. Perhaps he speaks. He doesn't know.

Their animal noises mingle as viciously as their bodies. Hannibal's orgasm crescendos so much more quickly than he prefers, but Will is possessed, rabid: this should not last, cannot, will not. Hannibal fights the tide of pleasure as long as he can, his knuckles white as he grips the island. Obscene noises fill the air. When he feels Will approach his final rut, he looses his hold on himself and lets Will fuck him through the torrent of release. Ecstasy laced with violence. Pleasure with pain.

As Hannibal comes down, putting the energy he has into holding still for Will, Will ruts faster, his head back, hair flying, the vessels in his neck dark red and pulsating with life. Will shouts and Hannibal feels Will's cock jerk as he comes in hot spurts, buried to the hilt.

Will falls out of sight as his legs give out. Hannibal hears his flesh slap against the floor and his noise of surprise turn to the pleasured breaths of afterglow.

Yet again Will surpasses himself. He's even more beautiful, even more rarified than Hannibal could have expected.

Hannibal slowly sits up, cleans himself, and gets to his feet only to sink down next to Will, who landed in a sprawl next to the cabinet of storage containers. Will's pants are tangled around his ankles; he's still wearing his shoes. Body sated, hands clumsy, he slides the condom off and, as if sensing Hannibal's observation, pulls his shorts and pants up, but leans back against the cabinet, exhausted again, as though he's forgotten he should fasten them.

Will rubs his leg and grimaces, then turns his liquid eyes to Hannibal. He blinks as though he's seeing Hannibal for the first time.

"I didn't mean to be so rough." His eyes widen slightly with concern. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I would have stopped you if you had."

Will nods as though he's known the answer all along. There's no need to tell him that he was indeed too rough; the pain will linger with Hannibal into tomorrow as a reminder of Will's animal violence. He's no masochist, but this hurt is excruciatingly good.

"I've never seen you quite like that," Hannibal observes. "If you'll forgive my asking, what did you see?"

Will places a tired hand over his eyes, rubbing them as though it's the only way he can stay awake.

"It was like I was looking at a crime scene. But I didn't have to concentrate to do it. Didn't have to make myself look. It was just there."

He closes his eyes and Hannibal watches the blood recede slowly from his neck and chest.

"A hallucination?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. It was more like it was inside me waiting to come out. It presented itself. I didn't have to look for it."

Though not deliberate, Will's words perfectly express his violent tendencies as well. Hannibal slips his briefs and trousers back on from his position next to Will on the floor. Hearing his own agenda for Will come out of Will's mouth without him knowing what he's saying threatens to excite Hannibal again in spite of the biological imperative to rest. He closes his pants carefully.

“What was it you saw?”

Will takes a deep breath and pushes himself up with trembling arms. His left hand tracks toward his thigh.

“I saw you… working on him… and it was like seeing you work on me.” His fingers twitch near the scar. “But I didn’t see that happen, so it’s not a memory. I guess it’s a projection. But I wasn’t you. I was me.”

Hannibal nods. “You are not usually the victim.”

Will sniffs and tilts his head. “I’m never the victim.”

“Memento mori,” Hannibal explains. “They tell us how we react to death. To its threat. You wanted to reaffirm life.”

Will cracks his eyes open. “That’s very generous.”

“What would you say was your reaction?”

“I felt like I was disappearing.” Will rubs one hand over his eyes again and the other over his thigh. “Like I would fade away like a whisper if I didn’t do something.”

“But you don’t normally do something like this.”

Will sniffs and shakes his head. He pulls his legs up, wincing, and pushes off from the cabinet and into a crouch. Hannibal gets to his feet quickly and offers Will a hand. Will stands unsteadily. His pants slip down his hips. He takes a step so he can lean against the counter while he fastens them, then limps to the trash with the condom.

Hannibal offers him a glass of water; he drinks greedily, spilling some down his bare chest. He dries his chest and stomach when Hannibal offers a hand towel and, when Hannibal tells him to go to bed, smiles sheepishly and limps away.

Hannibal retrieves his and Will’s clothes, strewn near the door, and inspects his for damage. Nothing his dry cleaner can’t fix. He takes them to his bedroom, pausing on his way back to check on Will, who’s sprawled on his back on top of the duvet with his shoes still on.

Will has inspired him: he removes the heart of Robert Gafferty from the freezer and sets it out to thaw. He had planned to serve it to Will in a confit with fig, peppercorn, and celery root paired with Biale Black Chicken Zinfandel. Though the symphony of the aggressive, mineral flavor of the heart and the equally strong notes of spicy and sweet Thai peppercorns, dark and sweet figs, anise, and fresh horseradish in a celery root cream with a crunchy toping of raw celery root would not be fully appreciated by Will, Hannibal thought he might understand the message of the dish: strong notes temper one another; strength shared is strength augmented. Now, however, he will cook the heart slowly until it’s rare and eat it with nothing but the Zinfandel.

A tribute to Will’s primal action.

Hannibal opens the wine and pours himself a glass while he waits for the heart to thaw. He does not particularly want to sit – indeed, Will has made his morning appointments with two insipid neurotics that much more challenging – so he leans against the counter. Hannibal drinks and studies the spot where he allowed Will to claim him more roughly than anyone else ever has. He doesn't bottom often. Will is a special case. Special enough to be worthy not just of a sexual relationship but of something significantly more difficult for Hannibal to offer: friendship.

Dr. Du Maurier thinks he's lonely in his well-tailored person suit. To some degree, he is. He shares all of himself with no one. No one has ever been his match. Will is getting very close, but he must be made to see human life in relative terms, not absolute terms. He already knows most of what he needs to know about himself: that killing makes him feel powerful; that he enjoyed killing Hobbs; that he enjoys their paternal relationship with Abigail; that regular sex makes him feel both powerful and loved; and that he has little power, joy, or love in his life otherwise. Once he ceases to bear his guilt like a cross, he will be to Hannibal not just a friend but a partner.

Hannibal scents the wine and drinks, savoring the notes of licorice and caramel underneath the assertive spice of the grapes. He has preferred not to share all of himself with anyone up to this point in his life. Will Graham changed everything. Will is the strong note in Hannibal's life he didn't know he was missing. Like the meal he intended to serve Will, life takes on more depth of flavor and texture when Will is around.

Now Will has seen what he can do when he is in the right frame of mind. He won't easily forget that tonight he transformed his sense of being a whisper, through sheer force of will, into a cataclysmic bang.

Hannibal resolves to reserve some of the nearly thawed heart to prepare for their breakfast. A protein scramble, perhaps, to remind Will of their first breakfast together. To send another obvious message to Will: after tonight, they are reborn.

Hannibal smiles as he finishes the wine, ties the apron around his waist, and lights the stove.

Chapter End Notes

Here's what Hannibal planned to serve to Will.

Cartoon Physics

Chapter Summary

"Fromage" scene fills part 1 of ~~3~~ 5: Will and Alana search the field next to Will's house. Alana returns later to find a hole in Will's chimney.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

if a man runs off the edge of a cliff
he will not fall

until he notices his mistake.

- Nick Flynn, “Cartoon Physics, part 1”

Sunday morning. Quiet. Peaceful. Lazy. Though snow blankets the ground, the morning sun says it will be a pleasant day. The dogs run around outside while Will prepares a simpler version of Hannibal’s “protein scramble,” aided by a lengthy trip to the grocery store yesterday. Four kinds of peppers, half a Vidalia onion, fresh cilantro, farmer’s eggs, and local sausage: a more flavorful version of what he would normally do for breakfast on a weekend. Before spending so much time in Hannibal’s kitchen, he never would have planned his breakfast so carefully, much less bought four kinds of peppers, fresh herbs, and local eggs and meat in the first place, or spent the extra ten minutes chopping the peppers and onion. But cooking with Hannibal has reminded him of how relaxing the careful preparation of food can be.

He’d known that in his early twenties when, on his days off from working homicide with the New Orleans PD, he’d spent time learning to cook the food he’d grown up eating and the food he liked to eat around town: gumbo, red beans and rice, étouffée, jambalaya, and all manner of seafood and soul food. No room in his little apartment then for any engines, and anyway, he’d been running from that part of his past at time; he hadn’t yet taken up fly fishing: nowhere in southern Louisiana to do it, and he hadn’t even known he was interested in it then; a few strays, yes, because he couldn’t not pick them up off the street, but socializing, training, walking, bathing, and playing with them didn’t take up all of his time. Cooking had been a way to decompress, to occupy his mind with something other than gunshot after gunshot and stabbing after stabbing, the malice of man for his fellows. New Orleans never wanted for homicide. Moreover, he’d entertained the notion that he might find someone with whom to have a relationship, and in a city renown for its food, he needed to know how to cook.

And so Hannibal has reminded him of something he already knew but had allowed himself to forget. Better, he muses as he chops a jalapeno, Hannibal has expanded his repertoire by teaching him how flavors meld, how a dish has notes like music, and how to blend and balance those notes as a saxophone and trumpet might converse in jazz or a blues guitar might answer a singer's voice in a complimentary register of pain. Hannibal has his haute cuisine, his opera, his artistic finery, but Will has always been rooted to the land and the water, the traditions and arts born of poverty and suffering. But that doesn't mean his red beans and rice can't have an element of high culture.

He'll do that this afternoon, he thinks as he slices a green pepper: he'll make another trip to the store and get as much as he can find that's fresh and local for red beans and rice. He'll slow cook it for hours, divide it into individual servings, and take it to work for lunch this week. No more 'poor pitiful Will, let's bring him a sandwich.' Not that he doesn't appreciate the consideration of Katz, Price, and Zeller. Just that he can fend for himself.

In fact, he feels great this morning. Just like he felt great yesterday.

He'd come home last night from giving Hannibal a bottle of what the liquor store clerk assured him was a fine Bordeaux, made a simple dinner, and enjoyed nearly an hour of the most gratifying masturbation he's had since going back to work. He still isn't entirely sure what happened Thursday night, first at the old distribution warehouse where they'd caught Silvestri and then in Hannibal's kitchen, but he's felt so good since then. He slept like a dead man that night. No nightmares. No dreams at all. The smell of Hannibal's protein scramble had woken him up; his stomach growled wolfishly: indeed, he felt like a wolf. Like an apex predator, strong, self-assured, confident in his skills. Like a man in the prime of his life.

No longer like a victim.

He hadn't even realized he'd been thinking in those terms until he'd seen Hannibal in that ambulance, his sleeves rolled up, his hands bloody, concentrating on the welfare of the patient. He hadn't thought that he'd allowed the physical weakness of being shot – losing all that blood, being weak as a goddamn kitten, climbing slowly back to health – to get to him so thoroughly. Or that his return to the field would see him working like hell through Gideon's copy of the Ripper, Silvestri's unintentional copy of the Ripper, and the real Ripper's sudden sounder. Or even that the stress of seeing so much brutality so quickly would be compounded by his own trauma – god, he hates that word – and his not having worked through it. Of course, Hannibal had tried several times to get him to talk about it: Hannibal excels at his profession. Will wonders how much of that was Hannibal the professional and how much was Hannibal the friend. Probably more of the latter than he realized at the time.

And yet it was Hannibal the lover who let him be so rough. Who let him affirm life, as Hannibal had put it. Will's mouth quirks as he places a pan on a burner. His leg had hurt all day on Friday. It's still sore this morning, though more from the hike he took yesterday and the strength training exercises he resumed than from Thursday night. He never would have guessed when he met Hannibal that the suave European would teach him so much about pleasure.

His cock twitches in his shorts. Who knew that sex could be a way to work through problems? It's more than sex, of course. It's trust and openness and intimacy. But it's also

sex. He's never had so much sex in such a short period of time. Part of him is astonished he made it to 38 without having a relationship this intense. But maybe he couldn't have done this as a younger man. He wouldn't have been able to appreciate Hannibal's refined maturity if he weren't so mature himself.

Will raises his arms over his head and stretches every muscle in his body, feeling the pleasant soreness of yesterday's physical activity in his arms, legs, chest, and back. He's learning to value his health. Hannibal helped him with that as much as losing it for a long, painful month did.

He feels limber, agile, quick, strong. Capable. Independent. It's the best feeling.

Will turns the stove off and scrapes the eggs and sausage onto a plate. Unlike Hannibal, he has the luxury of not caring how it looks. All he wants is for it to taste good and fill him up. He plans to work on the motor that's been sitting next to the front door for more than six weeks, then get out on the trails after lunch with a few of the dogs. Maybe he'll see how fast he can run a mile after that or get a start on that firewood he owes his neighbor.

Will glances out the window as he sits to eat. Still a nice day. Bright and sunny. Three of the dogs lounge in the sun where he can see them. The other four are around somewhere. He lifts a bite to his lips and closes his eyes happily as he chews. The meal tastes just like he wanted it to. The cilantro compliments the jalapeno and crushed red pepper. He picked up a blend of Columbian coffee, too, to replace the tasteless workhorse coffee he'd been drinking. He sips it. It's good, but he can imagine how a different blend or this stuff with a shot of liqueur would go better with the food. Will laughs to himself. Hannibal has him pairing coffee with breakfast now.

He wonders idly how Hannibal's dinner party went. He has no doubt that it was a huge success. Hannibal seems incapable of failure – though there's something about him that suggests otherwise. Only a man who's failed, only a man who's been badly hurt can understand evil the way Hannibal understands does. Perhaps one day Will will find out what happened. But he isn't particularly curious. Hannibal is a private person; Will is content to let him stay that way.

Will finishes his breakfast, washes the dishes, and calls the dogs in. He checks their paws on the porch, wiping off the mud before allowing each one to go in. They settle in their beds as Will washes the mud off of his hands, pours himself a digestif of whiskey, and sets about getting the motor in position so he can work on it. He doesn't have the right kind of work bench, so he ends up on the floor with his tools spread out around him.

He's unscrewing the housing so he can get into engine when he hears a faint animal whining. Everyone came in just fine, but he looks around at the dogs nonetheless. They're calm. Sleepy.

Maybe he imagined it.

He fits the Phillips head back into the screw and turns when he hears it again: an animal, probably a canine, not inside the house but outside in the field. He gets to his feet, puts his

shoes on, grabs his jacket, and goes out to investigate, tsking at the dogs when they try to follow.

He walks for ten minutes across the field without seeing or hearing anything else. The brisk morning air fills his lungs and even though he's worried about the animal, he feels so alive, so invigorated.

Nothing. He looks around one last time and heads back to the house.

Before he gets the snow off his boots, he hears it again. Animal distress. Definitely canine. Could be a dog or a coyote. Either way, it's suffering. His heart clenches: he can't bear to hear an animal suffer. If it's a canine and he finds it, it's big enough that he'll need help with it. Wounded animals are justifiably vicious.

Hannibal would be an obvious choice; he's strong and not particularly fearful. But he's an hour away and Will simply can't picture him helping to capture a wounded animal in a field.

Alana. She lives closer. She's not afraid of getting her hands dirty. Maybe she'll help. Besides, he hasn't really seen her since he got his health back. Their visits didn't exactly go well when she came to see him while he was recovering at Hannibal's house. He hadn't been in a good place then. And by the time Hannibal helped him find a good place, he'd effectively driven her away. It would be good to see her.

In fact, it would be good to practice what Hannibal has taught him on her. He's worthy of her now. He can be the passionate, experienced lover she deserves. He can give her such pleasure.

Will doesn't let himself hesitate as he dials her number. He's awkward and he curses his awkwardness, but he can hear her smiling on the other end of the phone as she agrees to come over.

Will's mind wanders while he waits for her to arrive. He has a good thing with Hannibal, but it's sort of impersonal. It's not a relationship. It never has been. He doesn't really want it to be. Neither does Hannibal.

But Alana….

He isn't sure if he's ready for something committed, but it's obvious even to him with his lack of social graces that she's interested in him. He sees it in the way she looks at him. She wants more than they have. And oh god yes, so does he. So much so that he hasn't tried to force things yet.

But now he knows what he's doing. Now is the time.

That thought makes Will's heart flutter. His chest tightens. The fluttering dips into his stomach. He takes a slow, deep breath, and picks up the mostly untouched glass of whiskey and drains it. Having his health back makes him feel physically capable, and he's confident in his ability to be a good lover, but the prospect of talking Alana into the intimacy they both want terrifies him.

He pours himself another finger, swallows it quickly, and goes to the kitchen for a glass of orange juice. He drinks some of it and leaves the rest on the counter, heading for the bathroom and the bottle of cologne Hannibal gave him to accompany the bottle of non-ship-on-the-bottle aftershave Hannibal gave him weeks ago. He says a silent thanks to Hannibal for giving him the gift of a sophisticated, masculine fragrance. It's spicy and woodsy, a lot like the soap Hannibal got for him: a huge improvement on what he used to wear. He dabs it behind each ear and along the clavicle at the top of his chest, then studies himself in the mirror. He hates looking at himself and decides quickly that he looks good enough.

Will returns to the kitchen, drains the orange juice, and straightens up the house. Not that he's expecting her to come inside, but just in case.

He wiles away fifteen minutes before his house is as clean as it's going to get without him taking a scrub brush to it. He sits on the edge of the bed where he can rub Ella's head to calm his nerves and tries not to think about how nervous he is.

He feels like he's thirteen again and about to go on his first date. But this isn't a date, he reminds himself.

His fingers still in Ella's fur as he hears the noise again. No, not a date.

Too nervous to sit still, Will goes upstairs to his closet and digs out a sweater and a vest to put on over his henley. Hunter green and khaki: very much who he is. But he isn't going to dwell on his appearance because this isn't a date. Even so, he goes to the bathroom and brushes his teeth until he spits pink into the sink.

Left with nothing to do but wait, Will sits on the edge of the bed again to resume rubbing Ella. She yawns and curls up next to him with a sigh. He turns his thoughts to his dogs and the wounded animal in the field as he tries to ignore just how much like a date this feels.

He hears Alana's footsteps on the porch and jumps up a little too quickly; Ella falls into the indention.

"Sorry, girl," he apologizes, giving her a quick scratch behind the ear. She smiles in forgiveness.

Will checks himself over. Hat. Vest. Smile.

Okay.

Then she's there and she's gorgeous and she's smiling.

"So, a wounded animal?" she says.

"Ah, yeah," Will says, stepping out onto the porch and closing the door behind him to keep the dogs inside. He gestures to the field. "Out there."

They cross the yard. The tiniest breath of air wafts her perfume over to him. Perfume. For him. His heart flutters again. He's thankful for the warmth of the whiskey in his blood.

“Thanks for coming,” he says, grateful that he doesn’t sound as nervous as he feels.

“You’re welcome.”

And she gifts him with a smile. He smiles back and relaxes a little. Not a date. Except that it is.

She stays half a step behind him, not entirely sure where to go.

“Ah, it’s out here somewhere,” he says, again gesturing lamely. “I heard it a few times. Looked for it earlier. Didn’t find it.”

“So we’re looking for it?”

Will nods. “We’re looking for signs of it. Movement. Tracks. Listening for whining or growling.”

Will notices that she has to take extra steps to keep up. He slows his pace, aware that he’s walking too quickly. His entire body jangles with nerves. He shoves his hands in his pockets so she won’t see him fidgeting. They walk in silence for what feels like an eternity. He can feel her warmth next to him. She’s that close. God.

“You’re looking good,” she says, tilting her face toward his.

That puts a spring in his step. He rolls his shoulders. “I feel good.”

Alana has to squint a little to look at him because of the brilliant sun; the crinkle around her eyes is unendingly attractive. He lets his eyes skate over her lips as part of a scan of the field.

“Even after last week?” she asks.

Will laughs nervously and rubs his fingers together in his pockets. “Last week was tough,” he admits. “But I got through it. Even if we didn’t catch him.”

“You caught someone,” Alana points out.

Will inclines his head. “One less rogue EMT looking to make an extra buck.”

“But not one less serial killer.”

Will acknowledges her point with a tilt of his head. She’s so close to him that he could reach out for her hand. She could slip her arm into his. God. His whole body tingles.

They walk in silence for a few more minutes, scanning the ground, looking for movement, before he remembers the one piece of advice that’s worked for him with women.

“How was your week?”

She takes a breath and swings her arms in front of her to clasp her hands together. “Oh, the usual.”

“Classes going well?”

Now she smiles. He sees it out of the corner of his eye. He could watch her smile all day. Even if her smile says that she knows his game.

“Classes are going just fine.”

He hears her tone: don’t play me. He smiles at that. It’s an acknowledgement of their mutual attraction, a way of setting terms. No games. Good.

They split up and search separately for ten minutes before regrouping. In that time, Will thinks through every terrible scenario that could have befallen the animal because it’s easier to think about that than it is to think about the fact of Alana here with him.

“You’re not expecting to find it alive, are you?” she asks.

“Be lucky to find a paw,” he admits.

She fixes him with a doubtful gaze. “So you invited me over to help you collect animal parts?”

Will laughs his nervous laugh. “I invited you over on the off chance we do find it alive. It’s harder for me to wrangle a wounded animal by myself.”

He takes a breath. Gotta do this sometime. “Did you think it was a date?”

He regrets the wording as soon as he says it. But he’s got to start this conversation somehow.

She takes just long enough to answer for him to feel like someone's pulled the ground out from under his feet. His stomach flutters until she answers.

“Honestly, it never crossed my mind.”

“Oh.” He laughs nervously, not a little wounded by her tone. “Why not?”

Again with a longer pause than he’d like. Grass rustles and snow crunches beneath their feet, but he feels weightless. Unmoored.

“You just don’t seem like you date,” she replies.

“Oh? Too broken to date?” He pats his heart to be sure she hears his sarcasm. He scans the field behind him as an excuse to watch for her reaction.

She smiles. “You’re not broken.”

The certainty in her tone buoys him, easing the tension in his chest and stomach.

“What’s your excuse?” he asks, feeling like they’ve eased into this conversation, looking over his shoulder again so he can really look at her. He’s too nervous to do more than let his eyes flit from the tawny grass to her and back.

“For not dating? Why are you assuming I don’t date?”

“Do you?”

“No,” she answers.

Snow crunching again beneath their feet. Weightlessness. He rubs his fingers together in his pockets.

“Seems like something for somebody else,” Alana elaborates. “I’m sure I’ll become that somebody someday, but right now, I think too much.”

A glimmer of hope. The ground coming back under his feet.

“So, what are you gonna do? You gonna try to think less or you just gonna wait ‘til it happens naturally?”

“I haven’t thought about it.”

Oh, she’s funny. Even if –

Will stops and looks around, remembering why they’re here.

“Are you seeing anything?” she asks.

“Ah, no, actually,” he answers, bewildered. “I’m not even seeing any tracks. I mean, except for the ones we made.”

That’s very strange. There should be tracks at least, if not also blood. But they’ve covered the field pretty thoroughly. There’s nothing here.

“Maybe it got away,” she ventures.

“Maybe,” he answers distractedly, still looking around. It has to be here somewhere.

She turns back toward the house and he follows, mildly annoyed with himself for paying more attention to her than to the animal he’d heard.

It’s very strange that they’ve seen nothing.

Maybe she thinks so, too, because she goes straight to her car. He stands a few steps away, trying to think of some pretext for inviting her inside. The way she looks at him, she seems to know that’s what he’s thinking.

“I’m sorry we didn’t find it,” she says as she opens the car door.

“Yeah, me too,” Will responds.

“I’ll see you later,” she says, sliding into the seat. Her eyes say that she wants to stay but she isn’t sure she should.

“Thanks for helping me look,” he answers lamely, cursing the words as they come out of his mouth. He raises a hand to wave as she starts the engine and backs out of the driveway.

He listens until he can’t hear the engine any longer, then goes inside. The dogs greet him with lazy yawns. He sits next to Ella again and thinks about what just happened.

It could have gone better. But then again, it could have been worse. He learned something valuable about her: she does date, but she thinks too much to date right now. That glimmer of hope is all he needs.

Will sighs as he unties his boots, removes his vest and sweater, and shifts to the floor to resume work on the motor. He has all day to think about what happened. All day to strategize. All day to nurture the tiny orb of hope that glows in his chest.

He smiles slightly to himself as he takes up the Phillips head and fits it into the screw.

Will doesn’t think. Can’t think. Just gives Alana enough time to leave, then grabs his coat, gets in the car, and drives without waiting for the engine to warm up. He must get to Baltimore.

I wouldn’t be good for you. You wouldn’t be good for me.

He can’t stop hearing her words echo in his head just like he can’t stop smelling her perfume and the soft, intimate scent of her skin, or feeling her hair in his fingers, or tasting her lips, her mouth, her tongue –

His chest constricts and a tear breaks free and slides down his cheek. Where she’d touched him. Angrily, he wipes it away, smelling wood smoke.

You wouldn’t be good for me and I wouldn’t be able to stop analyzing you because I have this professional curiosity about you and

And he’d silenced her with a kiss. Not a relationship. Just a kiss. *A great kiss*.

I am not *your patient.*

That should have been good enough. Why wasn’t it good enough? *Why?*

Because it wasn’t like she didn’t want to. God, she wanted to. Her lips said so. Her hand in his hair and on his neck said so. The heat from her body said so.

If I were my patient, my advice to me would be don’t do this. I have to follow my own advice.

Will curses and thumps the dashboard. Another tear slips free.

You have to stop thinking so much.

The way that I am in relationships… isn’t compatible with…

The way I am.

God, why not? Why not?!

Will speeds up without intending to. He hardly notices the snow falling in earnest. His skin tingles everywhere she touched him.

She came to him. At night. He didn't call her, didn't ask her to stop by, didn't initiate any of it. She. Came. To. Him.

What did she think was going to happen? After the other morning in the field? The it's-not-a-date-but-it-kind-of-is. She can't have expected him not to try something. She had to have not just expected it but wanted him to. Why else would she be there?

Will growls to himself. He feels like yelling. He feels like pulling the car over and raging against his shit luck. Instead, he merely tightens his grip on the steering wheel and drives.

Maybe if he hadn't knocked a goddamn hole in the wall.

He replays the scene again. He's torturing himself, he knows that, but he has to know why she kissed him back but said no, stop, I'm going to leave now.

He's halfway to Baltimore before the realization hits him.

There was no raccoon in the chimney. There was no animal in the field.

Hallucinations.

That's what they were.

Like Garrett Jacob Hobbs clapping for him in the audience at the symphony.

Goddamn hallucinations.

Will curses loudly and smacks the dashboard hard enough to hurt. Fear supplants anger. Fear constricts his chest, coils in his belly like a snake, tastes coppery on his tongue.

His mind isn't right.

Worse, she'd seen it before he did.

She'd come over intending to kiss him. To do more than that. And he'd screwed it up because he's hearing things. Because he's…

He doesn't know what he is.

Twin tears blur the road and drop onto his cheeks; he punches the dashboard this time. Too hard. He hisses and shakes his hand. It catches his eye: it's nearly black with soot.

He hadn't noticed.

Shit. What is *wrong* with him?

Will pulls over at the next gas station, wipes his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, and ducks inside to the men's room. He spends five minutes scrubbing his hands but the filmy soap from the dispenser is no substitute for real soap. He can't get his hands clean. And now he stinks of gas station men's room; the stray thought that Hannibal won't like this smell flits in and out of his mind as he dries his hands. He buys a bottle of water, keeping his eyes on a hair on the attendant's left shoulder, and drains it in the parking lot, wishing it were whiskey.

Their conversation runs again in his head as he gets back into the driver's seat, turns on the wiper blades, and finds the exit for I-95 east.

What kind of animal was it?

Might have been a raccoon.

Might have been?

By the time I knocked a hole in the chimney, it climbed out the top.

Well, at least it got out.

He can hear how stupid he is. How blind.

Hobbs in the auditorium clapping flashes in front of his eyes.

See? See?

Hobbs was on to something when he said that.

Because when Will replays his conversation with Alana, he hears the uncertain rise at the end of her sentence: *Might have been?*

She knew he was hallucinating before he did.

Will yells a curse this time, smacking the dashboard even harder, and nearly careens into the other lane. The crews haven't salted the roads yet, even though it snowed yesterday. His hands tighten on the steering wheel and he forces himself to take a deep breath. It shakes and wobbles around a lump of emotion in his throat. He grits his teeth and curses brokenly.

He'd thought he was so smooth.

What are you doing out?

I thought I'd come over, make some noise, shoo away any predators at your door. Looks like you're making plenty of noise all by yourself.

He hears the change in his voice and remembers his confidence rising because at that point he'd realized she had come to him.

The moment felt hopeful. She came back. At night. To shoo away predators. He'd felt buoyant. Suave. Seductive.

Looks like you're making plenty of noise all by yourself.

He laughs manically to keep from crying because goddammit he hadn't been listening. Because she knew. She knew he was hallucinating. And he didn't because he's blind, deaf, and dumb.

And then he'd acted on his assumption that she was there to pursue something with him. He'd been right about that. She came to him. At night. To make some noise. He'd told her what he was thinking. He'd been upfront with her.

You avoided being a room alone with me essentially since I met you.

He remembers the flutter in his chest and stomach. It was there but it didn't hinder him. He'd felt confident. Strong. Capable. Assured.

Because she'd come to him. At night.

Because he knows he can be a good lover.

But he hadn't been listening. He hadn't heard the doubt in her tone. He'd let himself hear what he wanted to hear.

I mean, you were smooth about it.

Evidently not smooth enough.

He can hear the uncertainty in her response now. *Fuck*.

He strangles the steering wheel in another fit of rage and nearly runs into the other lane again. He's lucky the weather has kept most people off the Interstate. But he doesn't feel lucky. He feels cursed.

Because she'd come to him ready to make something happen. Or if not that, at least she was open to the prospect. After all, he recalls with a tightness in his chest and a wrench in his heart – after all, she'd stopped sounding uncertain after a while.

And now you're making house calls?

Just a drive by on my way home, since you're not my patient.

No, I'm not.

And, for god's sake, for god's fucking sake, she'd kissed back. Alana Bloom had kissed him back. Passionately. Intently. With such promise.

The bottom drops out of Will's stomach. Tears sting his eyes again.

For all her uncertainty, she'd kissed back. That's how badly she wants to be with him. That's how much control she had to exert to follow her own advice.

He swallows around the lump in his throat. What's wrong with him? What's causing these hallucinations? It's not just stress. It can't be stress. It's got to be something else.

A scene from yesterday in the crime lab darts before him. As Price, Zeller, and Katz talked about the body, the olive oil, he'd felt displaced, unstuck in time. He'd felt like the man who killed the trombonist.

Had to open you up to get a decent sound out of you.

He'd felt murderous in that instant. Shit, he'd cast himself as the murderer. He can't recall doing that before.

And now, as he remembers more, now he recalls Zeller reacting with fear. It's a sense he has more than a memory; he'd be so fixated on the corpse that he hadn't been paying attention to them. But he'd known on some level that he was scaring them. He remembers walking back to the lecture hall, sitting, and staring at space for… he isn't sure how long. He remembers feeling like he was dissolving. Like he was so mixed up with this killer, with the Ripper, with the part of himself that enjoyed killing Hobbs – like he was so lost inside those other, more violent minds… so lost that maybe he couldn't find his way back.

He remembers feeling wrecked.

But mostly, he remembers not feeling anything very strongly apart from the sensation of dissolving into air.

Now he sees himself splayed on the floor of Hannibal's kitchen, speaking similar words to Hannibal.

I felt like I was disappearing. Like I would fade away like a whisper if I didn't do something.

Will strangles the steering wheel again, tears threatening to cascade over the confines of his eyelids, blurring the road like the snowflakes landing on his windshield. He feels sick. Dizzy. Like someone's pulled the ground from under his feet and left him suspended in midair, waiting for gravity to take over like the cartoon coyote who runs off the cliff. He does not fall until he realizes his mistake.

Well, he thinks wryly, he's finally realized his mistake. He feels like he's falling. He's not sure a ground exists to catch him… or how broken he'll be by the landing.

And what's Hannibal going to make of all this?

He doesn't know. All he knows is that he has to get Hannibal's perspective. Hannibal has become too integral to his life for him not to seek Hannibal out. Going to Hannibal's house at night without calling first – Hannibal might regard as intrusive. As rude. No, he'll certainly regard it that way. But it can't be helped. Hannibal hadn't minded when he'd dropped by the

office yesterday to consult with him about the murder. Hannibal, as usual, had helped him see things more clearly. The serenade.

Clarity of vision. That's what he needs now. He needs to see clearly what just happened between him and Alana. All he can think, as the wiper blades clear snow from the windshield, is that she came to him. She kissed back. Yes, he called her first a few days ago to check on the non-existent – *goddammit* – animal in the field. But she came to him tonight. She stopped by without calling first, without a warning. *She kissed back*.

Worse, it's so hard to divorce their conversation from the sweet, soft sensation of her lips, the intoxicating scent of her perfume and her skin, the light touch of her hands on his shoulder. All his body wants to do is linger on those sensations. The disgust he feels with himself isn't strong enough to kill his sensory memory.

Oh god, he's so fucked up.

You're not broken.

But he is. He is.

Will wars with himself, angry and fearful and desperate, as the city's lights appear, as the Interstate turns to Hannibal's neighborhood, as the streets turn to Hannibal's driveway.

Will scrambles out of the car and stalks up to the doorstep. He mashes the doorbell and paces as he waits. He needs to feel something else now. He needs Hannibal's help.

He paces and paces – what's taking so long? – and then tries the door. Unlocked. Desperately, he pushes his way inside. Hannibal will fix it.

Chapter End Notes

hides *peeks out nervously* *hides again*

Leda and the Swan

Chapter Summary

Fromage fill 2 / 4: Will goes to Hannibal after being rejected by Alana.

Chapter Notes

Cheers to the incomparable Janice Poon's Feeding Hannibal for helping me figure out the particulars of the dessert in this chapter and to the production team's Setting the Table for the tidbit about *Leda and the Swan*.

Some of Hannibal's reflections about Alana and Will come from this line that was cut from Apertif (available in the illustrated script). Hannibal: "I called your good friend Dr. Bloom about you. She wouldn't gossip, not a word. She's very protective of you. Smitten, I would say. She asked me to keep an eye on you."

Also, if you follow me on Tumblr and thought you were going to get something else, that's coming on Wednesday or Thursday. Sorry! I couldn't let that scene and this chapter coexist. Too big a clash.

Finally, the next two chapters will not be angsty.

Hannibal doesn't expect to see Will barge into his house just as he's prepared to fight Tobias Budge to the death. The rudeness nearly makes him choke.

"I kissed Alana Bloom," Will says, brushing the snow violently from his coat and tossing it on the foyer table without care for propriety.

"Will," he says lightly, keeping the surge of rage buried, "come in."

But Will has already pushed his way into the dining room. Hannibal gets a whiff of him as he strides past: fear, anger, desperation. Soot. Awful liquid soap. Recent fever. Arousal. Alana Bloom's perfume.

Fascinating.

Will is chaos. Always has been. And now he's rude, desperate chaos. And if Will weren't so worthy of study, he'd punish Will for his rudeness. He may well yet.

"You have a guest?" Will asks, stopping near the table.

“Colleague,” Hannibal answers, sweeping around Will to the patio door.

Tobias chose the right course. Indeed, he may have provided Hannibal with the solution to Will’s rudeness.

“You just missed him.”

“Didn’t finish his dinner,” Will says.

As usual, he observes but does not see. Never does see. Granted, he’s upset about what Hannibal knows was Alana’s rejection of him – she has to protect herself, smart woman – but that’s no excuse for his rudeness. He’s been trained to be better than that.

Yet he wouldn’t be himself if the training had taken. Will resists with such tenacity the imposition of order on his life. Frankly, it’s one of his most attractive attributes, as it’s the assurance Hannibal has that he can be brought back to himself. He will eventually shake off the tyranny of others and embrace his true nature.

Hannibal closes the patio door.

“An urgent call of some sort,” he explains. “Had to leave suddenly. This benefits you,” he says, walking purposefully toward the kitchen, “because I have dessert for two.”

Will follows him, wandering into the kitchen as if he’s not sure he should be here. Didn’t expect to interrupt Hannibal in the middle of dinner, did he. Of course not. Will’s myopia, coupled with an unhealthy dose of denial, prevents him from seeing Hannibal. Hannibal has known this about Will since Will returned to him with the letter certifying his sanity and a report about seeing the body of Garrett Jacob Hobbs in a shallow grave at a crime scene. Will’s scrutiny of Hannibal dwindled then and has continued to dwindle since.

Indeed, when Hannibal provided Cassie Boyle as a positive so Will could see the negative of Hobbs’ design, he set the terms of their relationship more than he could have guessed. He is a foil for Will. Yet a foil in the way of a distorted mirror: Will can only observe now; he cannot yet see. He will have to be shown. When he is ready.

Hannibal smirks. He always has been a source of clarity for others. Eventually, Will shall see.

But first, he’s curious about what happened between Will and Alana. She cares deeply for him. He remembers calling her after Jack Crawford first approached him to profile Will. She’s never been so tight-lipped about anyone. Wouldn’t say a word about him.

Are you purposefully avoiding the subject of Will Graham?

Absolutely. ...I don’t want any information about Will that I shouldn’t have as his friend.

She has a love for Will Graham that is pure in the way Will, in his innocence, is pure. It’s a pity that her heart will be broken. And Will’s. Will is quite lucky to have such an extraordinary woman not only protective of him but deeply in love with him, too. And he with her. More deeply than either of them realizes.

“Tell me,” he says as he removes the bread pudding from the oven, “what was Alana’s reaction?”

“She said she wouldn’t be good for me and I wouldn’t be good for her,” Will says.

He is every bit a man rejected by the woman he loves. And as such, he may not appreciate her perspective.

“I don’t disagree,” Hannibal replies. “She would feel an obligation to her field of study to observe you and you would resent her for it.”

Hannibal plates the bread pudding amid kiwi, starfruit, rambutan, and mangosteen, a combination of sweet and savory tropical fruits that will be lost on Will.

“I know.”

He says it with such certainty.

“Wondering then why you kissed her,” Hannibal says, closing the oven door and going to the refrigerator for the cream topping, “and felt compelled to drive an hour in the snow to tell me about it.”

If Will hears the second part of his statement, he chooses to ignore it. Quite caught up in himself tonight, though understandably so.

“Oh, I wanted to kiss her since I met her,” he says, “she’s very kissable.”

Hannibal has to agree to that point as he closes the refrigerator. If he were a different man, he would have long ago pursued Alana Bloom. But he likes her too much to put her at risk by associating too closely with her. Will doesn’t have that problem, not because he isn’t a risk for her, but because he doesn’t know just how bad a risk.

No, Will has a reason for doing what he did. A reason, Hannibal knows, that’s related as much to his deteriorating mental state as to his recent sexual tutelage. But Will needs to articulate which to himself, and to do that, he needs to say it aloud.

“You waited a long time,” Hannibal prompts, “which suggests you were kissing her for a reason in addition to wanting to.”

He stirs the cream, fluffing it so it will sit properly on the pudding. Will’s expression changes, as does his tone.

“I heard an animal trapped in my chimney,” Will begins.

Hannibal stops stirring, intrigued, and looks at Will. Auditory hallucinations?

“Um. Broke through the wall to get to it out. Didn’t find anything inside.”

Hannibal spoons the cream onto the pudding, imagining the scene at Will’s house: broken bricks and soot, a hole in the wall, the desperation of a man who cannot bear the suffering of

an animal breaking his house and finding nothing. Hannibal wonders idly what implement he used to break the bricks and how violent his blows were. He recalls the wall above the fireplace at Will's house: it's sturdy. His blows must have been quite strong. Heavy.

Will continues. "Alana showed up. She looked at me. Maybe her face changed, I don't know. But um…"

Will's bottom lip quivers. This admission is costing him a great deal.

"She knew…"

A great deal indeed. He's too far away and the bread pudding too close for Hannibal to scent his turmoil: a pity.

"What did she know, Will?"

"There was no animal in the chimney," Will says, "It was only in my head."

And in that moment, Hannibal sees Will drowning in the stormy seas of his illness. Rough waves carry his relationships, potential lifeboats, away from him. Someone else would be moved by Will's plight.

Will steps toward the kitchen island, his tone and bearing confrontational even as they are deeply distressed. Placidly, Hannibal adds shaved chocolate to the cream.

"I sleepwalk. I get headaches. I'm hearing things."

Hannibal stirs the pomegranate sauce.

"I feel unstable."

Will's pathos is exquisite. Desperate yet refined. Pure. As deeply and truly felt as any emotion Hannibal has ever seen expressed outside the opera.

Of course Will feels unstable. But this is the first time he's admitted it. He's come close enough that Hannibal can smell his bitter fear and the coppery chaos it incites in him through the sweet cream and pudding. He'd had some notion of smelling Tobias' blood and meat beneath this tropical dessert; Will's fear is stronger in his nose, a sharper contrast than he'd expected, as, even locked in mortal struggle, Tobias would not feel the fear Will does.

No. Only Will feels such pure fear and lives to tell about it. Everyone else perishes soon after.

"That's why you kissed her," Hannibal supplies, knowing Will has come to him for his perspective. "A clutch for balance."

Will tilts his head in acknowledgement, his mouth set in a flat line.

"You said yourself what you do is not good for you."

"Unfortunately," Will says, "I am good for it."

Hannibal spoons pomegranate sauce onto the plate, the final touch.

“Are you still hearing this killer’s serenade behind your eyes?”

Will laughs, a forced wheeze like a precursor to a bad cough.

“Well, it’s our song.”

Ah, yes, of course. Will is seeing Hobbs again. Hannibal suspected as much when Will lied to him yesterday about seeing no one behind his eyes.

Hannibal offers Will the dessert. Will smiles unhappily at it as though he’s just received the world’s worse consolation prize. A second terribly rude act in ten minutes.

But Will’s words just a moment ago interest him more than the rudeness irks him.

Unfortunately, I am good for it.

Then perhaps it needs to be worse for Will. As Hannibal wipes his hands, Tobias’ words spring to mind.

They may investigate me because I own a string shop. They’ll send men to investigate and I’ll kill them.

It isn’t that he wants Will dead – even if Will was unforgivably rude tonight – so much as it’s that he wants to test Will. Tobias is a lesser version of Hannibal; he will be ruthless with Will. Will must see again how ruthless he can be. And if he doesn’t see that, then he’ll learn just how bad his work is for him. Perhaps this has always been the only way.

“I hesitate telling you this as it borders on a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Will looks up at him with the eyes of a kicked puppy wondering from whence the next blow will come.

“A patient told me today that he suspects a friend of his may be involved with the murder at the symphony.”

He sees memories flood Will’s mind like a torrent of spring snowmelt, carrying with them a headache as Will’s blood pressure and heart rate skyrocket. It’s like watching a man take a blow to the back of the head in extreme slow motion. Hannibal, because he is generous with Will, accepts it as reparation for Will’s second rude act.

Will presses his dirty fingers to his eyes as though such a feeble action will do any good. He quickly realizes it won’t, expels a breath, and carries on like the good soldier he is.

“Uh, what did he say about his friend?”

“He owns a music store in Baltimore,” Hannibal supplies. “Specializing in string instruments. Perhaps you should interview him.”

Will nods. “Yeah,” he breathes.

And for a moment, regret stabs Hannibal. He worries that he’s just made a mistake, sending Will, who’s obviously ailing, to Tobias, who’s expecting him. He thinks of Miriam Lass, one of the few regrets in his life and hopes Will won’t join her. But she wasn’t Will. Will can handle himself. He will see Tobias before Tobias sees him.

Hannibal takes up his dessert and closes to the breakfast table. Will ambles along behind him.

Will toys with his dessert, eyes down, pained, submissive, giving Hannibal ample opportunity to study him. How different a man he is tonight from the man who, only a few days ago, claimed Hannibal with animal force. Superego and id. Or, in Will’s case, illness, guilt, empathy and id. Beneath Will’s fear, stress, and pain sings the sweet smell of fever.

Will spoons another bite of the bread pudding, making that pleased noise he can’t keep to himself when he truly enjoys something, and seems to remember his manners.

“How was your dinner party?”

His battered tone suggests that he couldn’t care less what the answer is, but he’s redeemed himself by asking.

Hannibal offers a brief answer and spoons the mangosteen out of the rambutan peel. It’s sweet, tangy, and a bit fibrous in his mouth, rather like Will is tonight.

As Will cautiously nibbles the star fruit, Hannibal considers the state of his inflamed brain. Auditory hallucinations now. Another new symptom. How will they affect his visit with Tobias? Does Will hear Hobbs without seeing him? Will is much more a visual person than an aural person, yet empathy runs through him so thoroughly that his hallucinations take on the cast of his cases: murder at the symphony causes him to hear animals in distress. Simply fascinating.

“Thanks for dessert,” Will says at length. “For the advice. And the lead. I’ll look into it tomorrow. What was the friend’s name?”

“Tobias,” Hannibal supplies. “Tobias Budge. Chordophone Strings. Downtown Baltimore.”

Will nods tiredly and presses his fingers to his eyes again. “I’m gonna go,” he says. “Headache.”

“You look like you could use some sleep,” Hannibal says.

He’s slightly disappointed Will isn’t going to try to seek out his comfort, although, frankly, he would take little pleasure in offering it and might lose a bit of respect for Will if he did seek it. He may be getting in too deeply with Will. It’s certainly good, then, that he’s going of his own volition.

Will just nods again, his skin sallow in the kitchen light, and gets to his feet.

“Goodnight, Will,” Hannibal says as Will turns to leave.

“Goodnight, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal has ample time to think as he cleans up – a good thing, as he has much to consider now that Will has made a move on Alana. Hannibal is not at all surprised by Will’s actions. He’d expected Will to do something soon and for Alana to be cautious enough to see Will’s instability and insist on more from him. The two of them provide him with a story of Shakespearean emotion: two lonely people suited to each other kept apart by the ignorance of one and the caution of the other. And he is the knowledgeable broker who, by his own grace, could intervene at any time. Yet he prefers to watch the collisions, the explosions, the trauma. It’s not for nothing he displays Bouche’s supposedly lost *Leda and the Swan* in his dining room.

And so he has front row seats to their human drama, a drama they play so well.

He can’t help thinking he may have just intervened too directly. But Will earned his test with rudeness. The test will purify him, one way or another. He needs to kill again and Tobias is wily enough to force him to do so. In his fragile state, that action will bring the terror of Hobbs out in full force. He will face that terror or be destroyed by it.

Yes, this must occur for Will.

It’s Alana he feels for most. So smitten with Will Graham, to have to reject him, it’s a true pity. He’ll have to take care around her to keep his condolences to himself unless it suits his purposes to do otherwise. If Will was devastated enough to drive all this way in the snow, she’s likely at home wanting to cry into her pillow but too stolid to allow herself the comfort.

How sad.

And yet curiosity overrides anything else he might feel. Hannibal smiles to himself as he puts the last dish away and finishes the late harvest Vidal from Linden. Tomorrow will be a very interesting day.

Catastrophe and the Cure

Chapter Summary

Hannibal gets his ass kicked. Will feels guilty. And a hot tub.

Chapter Notes

Title by Explosions in the Sky. Recommended as accompaniment.

I had one helluva good time writing this chapter. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will's head pounds mercilessly as Jack pulls the SUV into the parking lot behind Hannibal's office. His eyes skirt the brown stain on the pavement. Every time he sees it, it's a little smaller as rain and snow chip flecks of iron from concrete. Every time, his pulse quickens and the roar of blood in his ears drowns out everything else.

Will takes a deep breath to clear the noise from his ears. He can barely hear out of the left one as it is, though it's better than it was when the paramedics checked him over at Budge's shop.

Checked him over, though they didn't need to, because he's fine. He's not the one with an enormous needle stuck through his throat or steel strings wrapped around his face.

Guilt like a snarling beast rends his innards. Sensory memories he is helpless to stop flash before him: screech of a car's breaks, cry of the dog hit in the street, taste of aspirin to cover the coppery note of fear, the pool of blood, the shop's rich scent of wood giving way to the dank, macabre, ill-lit basement, a little shop of horrors, strings of gut everywhere, the sharp tang of lye burning his nose, the foul shit stink of entrails, the echo of his footsteps and too-loud breaths, the terrifying apprehension, time expanding so that everything seemed to happen over one long second, each sensation boosted and warped by adrenaline. So many guts coiled inside glass bottles, the dim sallow light cast by naked bulbs and fluorescent tubes, the shaking in his arms as he approached the hospital drapes, the rush of fear urging him to retreat, the bite of steel against his fingers, Budge's maniacal breathing in his ear, his finger on the trigger, the explosion in his head, the burning, the ringing, the drive to keep going, slamming into the wooden beam, squeezing the trigger.

Distant bang and flash. Miss right. Bang flash. Miss left. Bang flash. Miss center. Tobias' fleeing back. Giving chase up the stairs through the store and outside.

No sign of him. No idea where he went.

No dog hit by a car. All in his head.

Helplessness. Guilt. Revulsion. So strong he staggered into an alleyway and vomited next to a dumpster.

Will takes a deep breath to clear the memories. He swallows against the taste of bile and tries to take control over his own thoughts.

Maybe now that one ear is partially deafened, he won't think he's hearing hurt dogs. Until, that is, the time he hears one, thinks it isn't real, and a dog dies because of his instability. His madness.

He feels like vomiting again. He swallows thickly.

"Paramedics say he's pretty beaten up," Jack says, his tone serious but soft.

Will looks over at Jack, taking a moment to reconstruct what he thinks he heard Jack say. Jack's on his left side; he knows about the ruptured eardrum, but doesn't seem to remember. Maybe doesn't care. But Will discerns what he said: Hannibal. Pretty beaten up.

Guilt snaps and snarls and feasts. Will forces himself to breathe.

"Given what Budge did to the officers, that's not surprising," Will says wryly.

Play it cool. Don't let Jack know.

Moving his jaw compounds the ringing in his left ear and intensifies the pain that pulses with each beat of his heart. Ruptured eardrum, will heal on its own, something about using a cotton ball and Vaseline to keep water out when he showers, risk of infection. Something else about the powder burn on the webbing of his left hand. Follow up with primary care giver in the next few days.

Primary care giver.

His primary care giver is in need of some care himself. Guilt fattens as it gnaws his intestines. He imagines it as several sets of razor-sharp teeth attached to a sack, like some vicious hybrid of a great white shark and a tick.

As they walk around the building to the front door, Will's mind drifts again to the muzzle flashes from the shots he fired as Budge fled up the stairs. Miss right, miss left, miss center. He resolves to put in twenty rounds a day at the range for the next few weeks. Maybe schedule some time on a live fire range with moving targets. Maybe have Price clock him in the head first to simulate reality. Performance under stressful conditions.

Because if he weren't such a bad shot, Hannibal wouldn't have been put in a life or death situation. Wouldn't have had to defend himself. Wouldn't have had to kill Budge.

Just last week they'd talked about killing.

Why'd you stop being a surgeon?

I killed someone… or, more accurately, I couldn't save someone, but it felt like killing him.

You were an emergency room surgeon. It has to happen from time to time.

It happened one time too many. I transferred my passion for anatomy to the culinary arts. I fix minds instead of bodies, and no one's died as a result of my therapy.

He'd sounded content with that state of affairs. Effusive. Happy about his dinner party, obviously, but more expressive than usual. Happy in a way that Will hasn't seen before and may never see again. Now that he's had an active hand in killing a man.

Will takes another deep, steadying breath. He can get through this. Just keep it professional.

"I want you to tell me what you see," Jack says before they go in to the waiting room.

Will's brow furrows. "You don't suspect…?"

Jack's face hardens. "Just tell me what you see."

This is easier in a way, Will muses. He'll have to look at the scene before he looks at the man. He lingers in the waiting room as Jack steps into the office. From his vantage point, he sees the violence of the struggle. The broken glass. The heavy stag statuette on the floor. The overturned pedestal. All tagged and waiting to be bagged.

He steps inside. Scuff marks on the floor. Body bags. Budge and Hannibal's patient.

It happened one time too many.

Will smells blood on him beneath the stronger scent of death. His eyes travel from the floor to Hannibal in slow, steady increments. Holding his thigh above the knee. Will absorbs the smear of blood from Hannibal's mouth down his chin, from his nose, the cut between his eyes. Sees the bruise under his eye that will blacken soon. His pallor, heightened by the blood. Shock. And then his eyes themselves, watery and more expressive than Will has ever seen them. Similar to the red, watery eyes he'd seen when he woke up in the hospital after being shot. Is that what Hannibal's upset about?

Shit. Budge may have done this, but Will let him. Will failed.

"I was worried you were dead," Hannibal says, confirming Will's fears. His tone is full of such relief that Will can't speak right away. He nods slightly. Phantom aches, Hannibal's aches, map themselves onto his body. He keeps all of this inside, not wanting Hannibal to see it. After everything he's failed to do today, the least he can do is keep how rattled he is to himself.

"Tobias Budge killed two Baltimore police officers," Jack supplies, "nearly killed an FBI special agent, and after all of that, his first stop is here, at your office."

Goddamn Jack. Heartless. He's just doing his job, Will knows, but still… Heartless.

“He came to kill my patient,” Hannibal says softly. Will sees him remembering; his pallor worsens.

“Your patient? Is that who Budge was serenading?” Will hears himself asking. Keeping it professional in front of Jack.

Hannibal turns back to him. “I don’t know. Franklyn knew more than he was telling me. He told Mr. Budge that he didn’t have to kill any more.” Will watches him take an unsteady breath. Shock. “Then he broke Franklyn’s neck and then he attacked me.”

“You killed him,” Jack says. It isn’t a question.

Hannibal’s face is haunted, his eyes full of memories, when he nods and whispers, “Yeah.”

“Could Franklyn have been involved in whatever Budge was doing?” Will asks. These questions are easier than the questions he wants to ask about Hannibal’s state of mind, questions he doesn’t know how to ask.

“I thought this was a simple matter of poor choice of friends,” Hannibal says with a wry smile.

“This doesn’t feel simple,” Jack says suspiciously.

Jack goes to talk with the forensics team, giving Will the opportunity to lean against Hannibal’s desk and say a more intimate word to him. He takes a deep, shuddering breath. Guilt bloats, fat and sleek inside his chest and stomach; soon there will be no room for anything else.

“I feel like I dragged you into my world,” he says. He focuses on a portrait on the wall; he can’t watch Hannibal’s reaction.

“Nah,” Hannibal answers right away, “I got here on my own.” Hannibal looks up at him with such gratitude. “But I appreciate the company.”

Will smiles at that. Hannibal is resilient. He’ll get through it. But he’ll need a while to process everything. And right now, he looks like shit. Will pushes everything he feels aside and focuses on Hannibal. Not only is it the right thing to do, it’s so much easier than thinking about himself, his failure.

“Jack’s going to want to talk to you,” Will says. “At length.”

Hannibal looks up at him again. “I already gave a statement to an Agent… Reyes?”

Will nods and smiles wryly again, still leaning against the desk. “You heard him,” he says. “You know how he is.”

Hannibal’s lip tugs in an acknowledging smile. He surveys his office, then looks back up at Will. “What do you see?”

Will turns his head to glance at the scene again. He can see only so much without looking at the bodies and he has absolutely no desire to assume Hannibal's point of view. That's happening enough without him trying to look.

He takes a deep breath and sighs, then looks back to Hannibal. "An attack. Self-defense. Jack's going to want details about Franklyn. Since you gave me the lead from Franklyn. Jack's going to want to know all about that." He draws out the syllables in *all about* and a hint of the accent he once had slips out.

Hannibal also takes a deep breath that ends in a sigh. "I regret sending you to him." His eyes flit to Will's hand.

Will flexes his fingers, ignoring the pain from the burn. "It's nothing," he mumbles, looking down at his feet. He shifts his gaze to Hannibal again. Eyes still watery. Pale. Worsening shock.

"You look terrible," Will says. Hannibal sniffs in agreement. "Wanna go home?" The tiniest of nods.

Will pushes himself off from the desk and finds Jack.

"I'm going to make sure he gets home okay," Will says.

Jack looks suspicious but, having no reason to detain Hannibal further, gives his permission.

Hannibal's standing when Will returns. He gives Will the car keys and Will lets him lead the way, hanging back as Hannibal limps slowly out the patient exit. He settles in the Bentley with a grunt.

"Do you want to stop anywhere?" Will asks as he starts the engine.

"Straight home is best," Hannibal answers.

He stares out of the car window as Will drives the short distance to Hannibal's home. How many times has Hannibal driven him somewhere while he stared out the window in some state of shock and pain? Far too many. Though it's nice to be the caretaker for once, Will would trade places with him in an instant. Guilt balloons until he can barely breathe.

Will unlocks the front door and waits for Hannibal to hobble inside. He's moving like a block of wood, stiff and sore already. Will locks the door behind them and follows Hannibal to the stairs. Though exhausted from the post-fight adrenaline crash, Hannibal seems to want to get up the stairs by himself. He leans heavily on the railing and goes slowly. His leg must hurt like a bastard. Will's mouth quirks. Just as surely as Will knows that feeling, he knows Hannibal has to do this without help.

It occurs to him as he follows Hannibal that he's never been upstairs. Never seen Hannibal's bedroom, which is surely where they're heading. Probably Hannibal would prefer to keep it that way, but if so he's going to have to ask Will to leave. Will has gone through too much with him not to help him now. He knows just what Hannibal needs: hot bath, dressed wounds,

pain medicine, and rest. Later, food. Good thing he made red beans and rice for himself this weekend; it turned out well enough that he'll make it for dinner tonight so Hannibal doesn't have to cook. Protein scramble for breakfast. He's gotten good at that dish. The day after a fight is always the worst. However badly Hannibal feels now, he's going to feel exponentially worse tomorrow.

Will lags behind, giving Hannibal his space, until they reach the threshold. Hannibal stops and looks back at Will. Tiredness, uncertainty, and not a little wariness ghost his eyes. Will stands his ground. Hannibal sniffs and smiles, apparently pleased with Will's tenacity, and steps into the room, pulling his jacket off with a wince.

It's all the permission Will needs. He heads past Hannibal for the master bath, glimpsing a room dressed in the same indigo and grey as the dining room, though with crimson accents. Very Hannibal. He stops in the bathroom doorway, his jaw dropping a little, and looks over his shoulder.

"*When* were you going to share this with me?" he asks, playful annoyance in his tone.

Hannibal, untying the knot in his tie, merely smiles.

Will shakes his head and steps inside. Not only is the bathroom enormous and outfitted in what Will is sure is real stone, but it houses the largest hot tub Will has ever seen. There's room for two and then some. He turns on the hot water tap and studies the control panel for a long moment to get a sense for how the thing works. He thinks of all the baths he took in the regular-sized tub downstairs. Granted, he couldn't have made it up the stairs then, but still…

He shakes his head again, bemused by the whole thing. A spacious shower stall and antique wooden vanity with a similarly antique mirror round out the room, which, with the stone, would feel oppressively like a cave if not for the ample space and carefully-placed lighting and plants.

Hannibal designed this room and the dining room. The kitchen, too, surely. Probably the entire interior of the house. Will wonders idly why he didn't think of that before as he runs his fingers along the stone tiles on the wall. Yes, real stone. Slate. Like the color of the bedroom. Tiled so that the natural coloration in the stone slants in the same direction. Firm and solid but somehow not oppressive – almost light and airy, if a room can be simultaneously airy and reserved. Every bit who Hannibal is.

Will thinks of his own quaint little house. Though his design decisions weren't conscious ones, it's an expression of who he is just as much as this room expresses Hannibal.

His fingers leave the smooth texture of the ground stone as he drifts over to the sink and counter and notices a straight razor with a bone handle. Hannibal shaves with a straight razor. Of course he does. How could he not? There's a bristle brush and a bowl of what he assumes is fine lather; a strop under the sink, too – he doesn't have to look to know it's there. Other fine toiletries with French names grace the marble counter, each arranged so precisely that the effect is Japanese in its discipline and simplicity. Yet the antique wooden vanity evinces another style all together that Will can't name but that feels warm and welcoming.

Yes, it's every bit Hannibal's design.

The man himself appears in black briefs Will won't ever tire of seeing on him. Or off him. But he can't think like that, not when Hannibal's body is so obviously battered. The gash in his leg and a nasty cut near his wrist Will hadn't noticed before get his attention as Hannibal bends to retrieve a box of gauze from the vanity. When he straightens up, the angry red outlines of what will be impressive bruises on his abdomen and shoulder stand out against his abnormally pale skin.

Shit. What have I done?

Will steps forward unconsciously as he recognizes the shape of a man's dress shoe just above the hem of Hannibal's briefs: one, two distinct heel prints, rapidly discoloring. He hisses, wincing sympathetically, and feels like he's been kicked in the gut himself.

Hannibal sits with a sigh on the edge of the hot tub and watches him with tired but curious eyes.

Will nods to Hannibal's wrist. "What happened there?"

Hannibal, opening the box of gauze, glances at the deep cut. "Strings. Steel. Hid them under his coat. I believe he intended to use them as a garrote."

"That's what he did to one of the officers." Will swallows reflexively and flexes his fingers, feeling the cold bite of steel.

Hannibal notices. His eyes fill with understanding. "He tried the same on you," he says softly.

Will nods again, suddenly exhausted, and takes a few steps back to fall on the toilet seat. Thinking about Hannibal helped him forget that Budge nearly succeeded in killing him. He feels cold inside as he watches Hannibal dab his leg; shivers wrack his body even though he's still wearing his coat. His fingers drift to his scar. He groans internally: he thought he was over this.

Hannibal notices his distress. He nods to Will's hand. "And there?"

Will looks down at his hand stupidly, needing a moment to recall what's under the bandage.

"Powder burn," he answers. His voice sounds distant; the ringing in his ears increases. "Ah, he tried to, ah, strangle me… with the steel strings… but… I got my hands up in time and – " He lifts his hands to his neck to demonstrate, making a gun barrel out of his right index finger and firing it next to his ear.

Hannibal's eyebrows jump as he cleans the blood from his chin.

"Not hearing so well on the left?"

"Ruptured," Will says, fighting the urge to rub a palm against his ear. Even though he wants to touch it, the idea of doing so sickens him. It throbs fiercely through the three aspirin he took on the paramedics' advice.

Hannibal chuckles. “Looks like he got both of us.”

“Yeah,” Will breathes, tempted to close his eyes and drift off. He won’t. He won’t be so selfish. He stares vacantly at Hannibal’s arm instead, watching him clean the wound.

Hannibal looks up from the cut. He glances suggestively from the tub to Will. Will smiles tiredly – appreciatively, he hopes – and nods. Yes, he would very much like to join Hannibal in his enormous hot tub, even if it’s only to soak his aching muscles. He sighs at the all-too-familiar feeling of a post-fight adrenaline crash and stands slowly to remove his coat.

“I’m gonna go get some water,” he says. “Do you want anything?”

“The same,” Hannibal answers, “and the phone, if you would.”

Will nods and traipses downstairs. He hangs his coat up, pours two glasses of water, and grabs the phone. A loaf of bread catches his eye. He takes it and selects a bottle of red wine from the rack. He can just balance everything as he walks slowly up the stairs.

Hannibal’s eyes flash with approval at the wine and bread. He takes the phone. “Corkscrew?”

Will groans and rolls his eyes but sets off on a second trip. Hannibal is giving his DEA number over the phone when Will returns. Calling in a prescription. Smart, Will thinks as he uncorks the wine. Getting it delivered, too. Very smart.

Will waits to pour until Hannibal hangs up. He takes the phone and puts it on the sink counter, then glances at the wine.

“Should you have this with whatever you got?”

“Muscle relaxant,” Hannibal says with a half-bemused, half-admonishing expression. “One glass won’t hurt.”

Will inclines his head, remembering all the glasses of wine he had with painkillers and a meal. He’d generally limited himself to one glass, drinking at first to be polite and then because the combination helped him sleep… and then abstaining from one or the other so he wouldn’t be sloppy in bed. Usually the painkiller because he quickly discerned that Hannibal liked the taste of wine on him.

His cock twitches as he pours a generous glass for each of them. He rolls his eyes at it, glad his back is turned to Hannibal. *Nothing’s going to happen*, he wants to shout when it twitches again. He promises himself some time alone later. He’s been too stressed by the case and too depressed by Alana’s rejection to do anything lately. Nothing since… Sunday? Yeah. Sunday. Today is, what, Thursday? Friday? Whatever today is, it’s been too long.

He’s grateful that he’s still fully clothed when he turns to face Hannibal. Guilt gnaws at him again when he sees Hannibal’s wounds. He pushes the feeling aside as best he can and offers Hannibal the wine and the loaf of bread. He sits next to Hannibal, thinking he’ll have an easier time with the battle between arousal and guilt if he doesn’t have to look at the man.

Hannibal breaks a piece of bread and hands Will the loaf. Will does the same and sets it aside. They eat and drink in silence while the tub continues to fill.

“You know how to handle yourself in a fight,” Will observes after a while.

“Mmm,” Hannibal begins. “Boarding school. I was small for my age.”

Will nods as he chews. He swallows and sips the wine. “I was always the new kid.”

Hannibal hums and bites into the hunk of bread. Will’s sorry that Hannibal had to get nearly killed to show a more informal side of himself, but he’s happy to see it all the same. Doctor Hannibal Lecter of the fancy bathroom tearing bread with his teeth. Will smiles to himself.

He sips more wine, thinking a second glass might be in order.

“How old were you when you punched someone for the first time?”

Hannibal swallows. “Ten.”

“Eleven,” Will supplies.

“Ever been knocked out?” Hannibal asks.

Will nods. “Once. Bar fight. Seventeen.”

Hannibal laughs and shakes his head.

Will waits for him to answer, chewing and swallowing a piece of bread.

“Well?” he prompts.

“Technically, yes. Actually, no.”

Will sniffs. “Not a lot of bar fights in Europe?”

“Not the sort to get into them.”

Will glances skeptically over at Hannibal. “You didn’t learn all you needed to know in boarding school.”

“No,” Hannibal answers. “I boxed. As a teenager and a young adult. Then a few other martial arts.”

Will finishes his glass of wine. “You won a lot.” He gets up to pour himself another, his blood warmed by the alcohol.

“Why do you say that?”

Will splashes wine into his glass and offers the bottle to Hannibal, who accepts a top off.

“You don’t seem accustomed to losing.”

Hannibal sniffs and sips the wine. Like Will, the adrenaline crash has made him more tipsy than he would usually be on a single glass. He turns off the tap and starts the jets. Will brings the glasses of water over where they can be easily reached and quickly strips to his shorts. He keeps his eyes on the water as Hannibal removes his briefs and steps into the tub, but he sees what he wanted to avoid seeing anyway.

Well. So what if the sight of Hannibal arouses him. It's not as if he's some blushing virgin. Hell, the last time he was with Hannibal, before this thing with Budge, he fucked Hannibal so hard they both ached in the morning. But that was before Alana and – no, he won't think about that.

To Will's great relief, Hannibal closes his eyes and tips his head back, sighing contentedly in the hot water. Will seizes the opportunity, pushing his shorts down and quickly climbing into the tub. A hum of pleasure escapes him as the heat and gentle massage of the jets relax his muscles. He could get used to this.

After a few minutes of pure relaxation, his mind kicks back on and drifts to Hannibal's past as a fighter. Boxing makes sense. Hannibal's intimate knowledge of the body doesn't just come from his past as a surgeon, his interest in anatomy, or his sexual experience – or even from boxing. Everything Will saw in the office spoke of a bare-knuckle brawl of the sort he got into as a teenager when he let his mouth get him into trouble in the bars just off the boatyard. The other mechanics resented his expertise; Dad had pretty well abandoned him by then, and he used his ability to read people to pick fights with anyone remotely resembling his father. The boatyard drunks always accommodated him and never seemed to mind that he was at least half their age and didn't have much size.

But that's not who Hannibal is. Martial arts, he said.

"T'ai chi?"

"Hmm?"

Hannibal's eyes open a fraction.

"You mentioned martial arts."

"Yes," Hannibal answers, closing his eyes again. "T'ai chi."

He sips his wine. Will follows his lead, pleased by the way it thickens his head and dulls the memories, the voices, the guilt.

T'ai chi. It fits with Hannibal's graceful, fluid movements, and the body control and balance it teaches could have helped him today, but it isn't the most ass-kicking martial art out there. More like a meditative practice. Will's mind flits to Bruce Lee. He wasn't inclined to have heroes when he was growing up, but Bruce Lee was a sort of a hero to him. He has to think a while to come up with the name of what Bruce Lee did.

"Jeet Kun Do?"

Hannibal hums again. “Style without style. Spontaneous reaction. Be like water, move fluidly without hesitation.”

“Too undisciplined?”

“I admire the philosophy.”

Will takes a long swallow of wine.

“Jujitsu?”

“Are you going to run through the list?” Hannibal asks with a bemused smile.

Will half-shrugs and drains his glass. They sit for a few minutes in silence, the bubbling of the tub the only sound in the room, before Hannibal continues the conversation.

“You learned all you needed in bar rooms?”

Will opens his eyes, unaware that they’d slipped closed.

“Mm? Oh. Police training does count for something.” He runs a warmed hand over his face and feels really good for the first time in days.

Hannibal hums curiously. “What sort of police training?”

“Oh, ah, basic hand-to-hand combat. A few throws. Pressure points. Adapted from military training.”

“You learned that as a homicide detective?”

Will shrugs. “Everyone gets the same basic training. It’s been years since I had a refresher.”

“Easier to carry a gun?”

“Mm. Not that I can shoot straight.”

Relaxed by wine and warmth, Will feels less ashamed confessing his failure.

“I missed him. Budge. Three times.”

“After you…?”

Will follows Hannibal’s eyes to the now-soaked bandage on his hand. He peels it off and drops it on the floor.

“Yeah.” He takes a deep breath. “I just think if I’d been a better – ”

“Will,” Hannibal says, forcefully enough that Will stops talking and looks at him. “Don’t blame yourself.”

Will stares at the burn on his hand, seeing himself miss right, miss left, miss center.

“It’s hard not to,” he says at length.

He can feel Hannibal looking at him. He keeps his eyes on the burn.

“Then you must try harder to stop.”

If he’d just tilted the gun a little more to the right, he’d have taken off a piece of Budge’s skull. Less than an inch and none of this would be happening.

He’d have missed this time with Hannibal. Guilt like a mosquito bites into him, sucks his blood.

“He ran from you?” Hannibal asks.

Will nods fractionally.

“And you’d just ruptured your ear drum?”

Will’s mouth tugs unhappily, knowing what Hannibal’s trying to say.

“Excuses,” he spits.

“Reasons,” Hannibal counters. He smiles. “I’m just glad you’re not dead.”

Will sniffs. “Me, too. Glad you’re not dead.”

When Will looks at him, the electric spark that initiated their intimacy ignites again. He sees it in Hannibal’s eyes, feels it crackling in the air. Hannibal just sighs, mild annoyance written on his face, then tips his head back and closes his eyes. Will follows suit. Nothing to do about it today. But once they’re both over the worst of aches, he’s got something in mind he wants to try. Something that makes his heart skitter and his innards tighten. He isn’t all together comfortable with it, but Hannibal makes it look intensely pleasurable and now that Hannibal’s the one who needs his sense of control back – even if he hides his vulnerability – well… it’s not for a while. He has time to think about whether he really wants to do it.

In the meantime, he feels his body falling asleep. He forces himself to sit up, find a glass of water, and drink most of it. Hannibal opens his eyes a fraction and nods when Will offers him his glass, then drinks more greedily than Will has ever seen him drink. Will marvels again at this unrestrained side of Hannibal.

Will takes Hannibal’s glass, sets it on the floor, and relaxes again, his head back against the tub wall. Feels so good. He may have to look into getting one of these. Or maybe he’ll just figure out how to share Hannibal’s more often.

“You have a hot tub because you get into fights often?” Will asks cheekily.

Hannibal chuckles. “I enjoy vigorous exercise,” he answers. “Sometimes I overdo it.”

“Vigorous exercise?” Will echoes, his expression turning desirous without his intention.

Hannibal smirks. “Running. Swimming,” he clarifies.

Will hums. That also makes sense. He’s been wondering how Hannibal maintains such a strong body since he first saw Hannibal naked. No, since he woke up in the tub downstairs, convinced he was freezing to death, and learned that Hannibal had carried him from the office to the car and the car to the tub. Significant upper body strength. He must have come up here and soaked for a long time after that, Will muses. He could pick Hannibal up if he had to but his back and shoulders would punish him for it later.

“Weights?” Will asks.

Hannibal hums a yes.

Will leaves the topic and they sit quietly again, content and relaxed. At length, Hannibal sighs and pushes himself up and onto the edge of the tub. Will stares at the plants behind the tub so he can surreptitiously watch the water cascade down Hannibal’s body. His skin is flushed from the heat and Will wishes for a single, wild moment that they could make slow, sweet love so he could show Hannibal how sorry he is, how much he cares for Hannibal, how much he feels for him. How safe Hannibal is with him.

But that’s for another day. Will pushes himself up and out as well, fighting the shame he feels over being half hard as Hannibal carefully dries his bruised body. Will wraps a towel around his waist and for the first time wonders if any of his clothes are still here.

Hannibal, always prescient, says, “Downstairs.”

Will nods. He collects the wine bottle, bread, and glasses, and treks downstairs. Clothes wait for him in his room, wrapped in bundles from Hannibal’s dry cleaner. Will finds shorts and an undershirt. He intended to go shopping for dinner, but he’s so relaxed and sleepy…

The doorbell startles him. Who would…? Oh, right. Pharmacy delivery. The robe Hannibal got for him hangs in the armoire; he ties it around his waist and answers the door. Bag in hand, Will fills another glass with water and trudges upstairs again.

To Will’s relief, Hannibal has put on a pair of briefs. He’s taping a dressing to his leg. He motions for Will as he dabs iodine on his forearm, then glances from Will to a roll of gauze. Happy to help, Will holds the gauze in place as Hannibal wraps it around his arm, then holds the wrapped end while Hannibal tapes it.

“Should I get a steak for that shiner?” Will jokes.

Hannibal laughs, gesturing instead for Will’s hand. He studies it, turning it over, then produces the same cream the paramedics put on it, wraps gauze around it, and tapes it in place.

“Thanks,” Will mumbles.

Hannibal shakes a pill out of the bottle and swallows it with the fresh glass of water Will brought, then offers the bottle to Will.

“Would do you a world of good, too.”

Always wary of anything other than aspirin, Will says, “I was going to go shopping for dinner.”

Mortification flashes on Hannibal’s face.

“Don’t worry, I won’t destroy your kitchen,” Will says quickly. “Just red beans and rice with sausage. Easy.”

Hannibal relaxes. “There’s some sausage left over from the party,” he says. “In the freezer. Second shelf. Middle.”

Will nods, then reads the name of the drug on the bottle.

“It’s not yet 1 o’clock,” Hannibal points out. “You have time for a nap.”

“What’s this stuff do?” Will asks.

“Exactly what its name says,” Hannibal answers. “Sedation is its chief side effect. You’ll sleep well.”

“That’s why you chose this one?”

“In part. It increases stage 4 sleep – the deep, restorative sleep that heals tissue.”

“So you plan to sleep through it?”

“As much as I can.”

Will inclines his head at the wisdom of Hannibal’s approach to pain.

“Try it,” Hannibal encourages. “You’ll thank me later.”

Hannibal hasn’t steered him wrong yet, Will reasons. And he hasn’t slept well since the night Alana… Will swallows the pill before he can think any more about it. He caps the bottle, gathers the medical supplies, and places everything on the counter.

Hannibal smiles slightly. “You’ll need to lie down in about fifteen minutes.”

Will nods as he collects the towels. “Need anything else?”

Hannibal shakes his head a fraction and Will turns to leave.

“Will.”

Will stops and turns back to face him. Hannibal’s eyes are soft, sincere, expressive.

“Thank you.”

Will smiles crookedly and ducks out of the room before the volatile mix of emotions can show on his face. He’s glad Hannibal talked him into taking something that will make him sleep. He doesn’t want to deal with the turmoil he feels.

Instead, he hangs the towels in the bathroom downstairs so they can dry, drains his bladder, and gets into bed. He stares at the ceiling, trying to tamp down the creeping sense of being an invalid.

He closes his eyes and, for the first time in a long time, tries a visualization technique that was supposed to help him sleep but never really has. He imagines his favorite patch of woods in the Smokies. Enormous old growth trees. Waterfalls hidden not far off the trail, marked on the Forest Service's topographical map for those with land navigation skills and the desire to hike uphill over rough terrain for a mile. He’s never seen another person out there. Just mountains and water and trees and peace.

When he dreams, it’s of himself and Hannibal alone in that spot.

Chapter End Notes

This may go without saying, but wine and muscle relaxants is a dangerous combo.

The Refraction of Light

Chapter Summary

Will cooks for Hannibal. Will apologizes.

Chapter Notes

So I just read *Hannibal Rising* and it inspired this. It may seem OOC for Hannibal to some people. If so, apologies.

There's still another Fromage chapter left after this one.

"She took exquisite care to spare him exertion."

– Thomas Harris, *Hannibal Rising*

Hannibal climbs slowly from sleep, reluctant to leave behind the first good dreams of Mischa in too long. A combination of his chemically-relaxed state, his recent bonding with Will, his genuine fear that Will was dead, and the smell of the simple yet sustaining food Will is preparing for him wafting up the stairs produced the visions of her happiness. He recalls an intertwined memory in the dream: having his finger sewn up by one of the rarest women of his acquaintance. Will provided considerably less assistance than she – but it has been a long time since Hannibal asked for any at all.

So little in his life has genuinely shaped him. If he considers the dream a sign, Will Graham has ascended to that most exalted of pantheons.

He does not consider the dream a sign. Merely additional cause to observe and direct.

Nonetheless, he lies still and thinks of mathematics, allowing control over his medicated muscles to solidify until it is again the finest steel: firm yet adaptable. He listens to Will's movements in the kitchen. Will rises every seven to eight minutes, the time determined idiosyncratically, to lift the lid on the pot, stir its contents, and return to the armchair where he is likely thinking or, even more likely, fighting sleep. Hannibal hears tiredness in the slight scuffle of his boot-clad steps. For the meal to be as far along as it is, Will has been up for two, perhaps three hours.

When, at length, he gets to his feet, his body is sorer than it's been in a good while. It's been a long time since he was in a legitimate fight. Inwardly, he shakes his head at himself: he'd let his intense sadness and regret, caused by Tobias' implication that Will was dead, govern their brawl. He defended when he should have attacked. An infinitesimal part of himself he has never fully tamed welcomed the beating, wanted scars to mark Will Graham's death. He will have them: on his left forearm 4.3 centimeters below the wrist and right thigh 5.7 centimeters above the knee. They will remind him of the danger of getting too close to Will Graham, of himself as the moth attracted to the flame.

And yet Will lives. The story has not reached its end.

Hannibal stretches systematically, contracting and lengthening each muscle with precise motions to circulate blood that will filter the discarded cellular matter of mild rhabdomyolysis. Electrolytes are in order, as well as food, followed by more rest. He does not allow himself to hope of additional pleasant dreams as he dresses plainly in trousers and a white oxford, takes a generous dose of ibuprofen, and descends the kitchen stairs softly to see if Will is –

Yes. Half-asleep in the kitchen armchair.

Will is the first threat he's faced who's also so vulnerable he can be shaped. And vulnerable he looks now.

His affection for Will is stronger than it ought to be: that's the real threat.

And yet he allows himself to pause on the stairs and memorize the moment so he can draw it later: Will, fully dressed, glasses on, slumped in the chair with his head lolling in his right hand, fingers beneath his glasses as though he'd gone to rub his eyes and gotten stuck that way. His bandaged left hand is limp in his lap. A small coffee stain adorns it, confirming Hannibal's supposition: Will has been to the market, grabbing a cheap coffee en route, in addition to putting in an hour's cook time and half an hour's prep. The lingering effects of the muscle relaxant and the day's physical trauma compounded by a caffeine crash have conspired to nearly knock him out.

His regard for Will threatens to spill over into something else. He thinks of the raw wounds on his arm and leg – the scars they will leave. The lesson he must not forget.

He tucks the feelings away and proceeds down the stairs loudly enough to stir Will. Hannibal listens to his deep intake of breath as he wakes fully, then the subtle movement of bone and muscle as he stretches beneath the lightweight cotton of his rust-colored Tartan oxford. Will folds his glasses into his breast pocket and offers a half-smile.

"You were right about the sleep," Will says, his voice rough and eyes tired. "But when is it going to wear off?"

"Within the hour," Hannibal answers, pouring two glasses of pomegranate juice. He offers one to Will who stands and takes it, sniffs in a manner he thinks is subtle, and drinks. A bit too tart for him but he'll drink it because he knows he should.

“Moving helps,” Hannibal offers, leaning slightly against the sink. “You’ll metabolize the drug faster.”

“Been moving plenty,” Will grumbles.

Hannibal sees him hide a wince when he looks toward the overhead light.

“How’s your head?”

Will sniffs, his eyes drifting to the blackcurrant smudge under Hannibal’s eye.

“How’s your everything?”

Hannibal chuckles. “Tyrian purple,” he responds. “I could be royalty.”

“Well, then, your majesty, dinner is served,” Will says with an overwrought gesture to the simmering four quart pot.

Hannibal smiles at Will’s clowning. “And what would you pair it with, chef?”

“Something the color of your eye,” Will answers. “Beyond that, no idea.”

“You underestimate yourself,” Hannibal says. “What goes well with a spicy dish?”

Will rolls his eyes as though he’s being badgered and, as if by rote, lists appropriate varieties of wine. So he *has* been paying attention.

“But I don’t want to pick,” Will says, finishing the list and then the juice. “You pick.”

Hannibal does, listening to Will choose bowls and spoons. He selects a spicy old vine Zinfandel he’s had for over a decade. An excellent bottle to split for this meal.

Will takes rice and bread from the oven and a small bowl of chopped green onions from the refrigerator. No dishes crowd the sink. The island bears no sign of sloppiness, nor the butcher’s block, though Hannibal scents fresh onion and peppers on its surface.

When they adjourn to the dining room, he finds to his surprise that Will has set the table, albeit in minimalist fashion. Will feels deeply guilty about failing to kill Tobias and, to his thinking, exposing Hannibal to a fight and a mortal act alien to him. Hannibal has never witnessed such pure higher-order emotion as Will Graham’s guilt.

He is quick to compliment the meal and pleased when Will’s shoulders relax a hairsbreadth. Will has done well, seasoning the staples of human existence, rice and beans, with parsley and thyme from the herb garden at Hannibal’s back. Will selected three hickory-smoked ham hocks from the market for the base. The sausage is slightly out of place. Perhaps he should have let Will choose sausage on his own. One of the vendors makes a nicely seasoned Andouille that would work better than the sausage of Hannibal’s making. Or, better yet, Hannibal will make some Andouille sausage himself and present it to Will as a gift.

Halfway through the meal, Will's eyes close, his muscles lose tension, and, as his body assures itself it isn't dying, a myoclonic jerk of his left hand awakens him with a jolt. He smiles sheepishly and finishes the meal, including a pecan pie from the market, without further interruption.

The wine gets to him, though. He sways when he walks ahead of Hannibal into the kitchen. Dear, sweet Will, driving himself so hard to make amends. Hannibal has to admit that he's doing quite well in light of his usual thoughtlessness. With time and the proper motivation, Will could be the best of the singular people Hannibal has had the good fortune to know.

Since he passed by Will with Abigail on a gurney and saw Will's still-bloodsplattered face as he leaned against the rental car, Hannibal has known that guilt is Will's greatest weakness. Fear he knows well. Fear he has developed tactics to outsmart, outflank, or ignore. Guilt, however, eats at him like a parasite. And now that his illness has let fear loose inside him so that he cannot always overcome it, the combination of guilt and fear affords Hannibal the perfect conditions for helping Will recover his true self.

Will stays on his feet as they do the dishes in silence, which he breaks only once to insist that he can finish the task and that Hannibal ought to rest. A look hushes him.

When they're finished and the kitchen is once again spotless, Hannibal, his hand on Will's neck and fingers lost in the fine hair of Will's curls, says, "I think I'll read. You should go to bed. You look exhausted."

Will's pupils dilate until they color his irises black; Hannibal knows Will will follow him to the study.

Will does. Not subtly. He's too tired for that.

Will sits on the couch and watches while Hannibal builds a fire with wood from an oak Will brought him before he returned to work. He'd been rebuilding his strength in part by clearing newly fallen trees from the woods near his house. Though thoughtless in other arenas, Will takes care with his crafts: the wood is perfectly split, uniform in length, and as close to the ideal dimensions for this fireplace as Will could get with his hands and a maul. Hannibal feels the smooth texture of the oak as he arranges enough logs to burn for a few hours. When Will brought the wood – a pleasant surprise for which Hannibal had thanked him until he blushed vermillion – he'd said this oak was at least one hundred and twenty years old, a fine second growth specimen. He'd been sorry to find it fallen one late summer's day, the victim of an unseasonable wind storm. Will spoke of the tree as though it were a companion, a friend he visited with his dogs when he walked the contours of his refuge. Hannibal had been honored to receive such a fine gift.

He lights the tender – balls of dried hay from Will's field – and watches until the smaller logs catch. The earthy scent of burning hay and oak fills his nose: another scent he associates with Will. He turns his head to smile at Will, who's draped himself over the arm of the couch to stare at the flame. It dances in his eyes for a long moment until he notices Hannibal watching him and offers a sleepy smile.

Hannibal settles into a wingback leather armchair. Will stands and stretches, the fibers of his muscles pulling under his skin, and stops a few feet short of the chair, unsure of how best to proceed.

Hannibal studies him. “What do you want, Will?”

Apparently, for Hannibal to speak to him, because he steps forward, drops to one knee, and reaches for Hannibal’s belt. He pauses and looks up. Hannibal, not one to refuse the offer of a sexual favor from Will, smiles encouragingly.

Will goes slowly, his hands clumsy with wine as he unloops the leather and releases the prong. He goes slowly, too, Hannibal is delighted to see, because he wants to memorize every part of this, his eyes wide as he takes it in. Hannibal quite agrees with him and studies everything about Will as he finds button and zipper. Lips parted, breathing anticipatory, pupils still enormous, skin glowing in the firelight, Will is mesmerized. His enthralled expression so affects Hannibal that he’s hard before Will pulls him out of his briefs.

Will studies him for a moment and unconsciously licks his lips. Hannibal has taught him enough on the few occassions he's done this to make him passably good at it, particularly because he makes up for skill with enthusiasm. But he’s never been this fascinated by the sight of Hannibal’s cock. For a moment, Hannibal wonders if he’s remembering something. His scrutiny of Will’s expression and demeanor increases. No. Not remembering. Just – his breath catches, cock twitches – just very interested.

The twitch snaps Will out of his near stupor. He glances up at Hannibal through his lashes and wraps a firm hand around the base of Hannibal’s cock. Hannibal runs a gentle hand through Will’s hair. Will closes his eyes for a moment, savoring the sensation of being petted, and releases a rough, desirous, wine-scented breath.

Hannibal watches as he opens his eyes, licks his lips deliberately, and lowers his head. First he kisses the tip, almost formal, and then his tongue flickers, trying to tease, succeeding. Just the tip of his tongue and warm breath from his nose for nearly a minute. How he concentrates. He drops the other knee and makes short work of his brown corduroys to free himself. But he doesn’t touch. Mindfully, he switches hands on Hannibal so he can run his now free right hand up Hannibal’s undamaged leg. He realizes his left hand is still bandaged and switches back to the right, but keeps his left hand on Hannibal's hip. Making a show of delaying any gratification for himself. Apologizing in splendid fashion.

Hannibal tips his head back and focuses solely on the sensation as Will opens his mouth and begins. He cues up a fine piece by Bach as performed by the New York Philharmonic three years ago. Intensity and passion appropriate to the piece from each musician. And Will, setting a pace appropriate to the mood of this act, scraping his teeth just when and where he should, sucking lightly, licking, stroking. Gently teasing testicles. Unhurried. Loving.

Then changing the tempo, moaning, licking, sucking harder, making Hannibal’s pulse pound, drawing sweat from his pores and from his mouth genuine gasps and moans. Bringing him dangerously close – and then pulling back.

Calm, slow, deliberate strokes, holding Hannibal safely in his mouth, sucking lightly. Determined to outdo himself again.

And oh, how he does. Twice more he brings Hannibal to the brink, his attention so focused that Hannibal has to invoke all of his control not to get too rough. He clamps down on the chair's arms instead of Will's skull. His thighs strain with the effort of keeping his hips in check. Will tries to hide the ache in his jaw as he builds a fourth time, a final time, it must be because Hannibal can't take much more and Will has little left to give.

As the allegro movement draws rapidly to a close, Hannibal takes a handful of Will's hair and encourages him to persevere with light tugs and earnest moans. His hips twitch in time with the music and Will understands. He shifts into his final form, giving Hannibal all he has, and the musicians give all they have, and Bach all he has, and Hannibal rides their crescendo into a perfectly-timed climax, pulsing into Will's mouth, his now-gentle sucks timed with spurts from Hannibal's cock. Will lets go of him to swallow, then reclaims him so he can come down in the soothing warmth of Will's mouth.

At length, Hannibal lets his hand drop from Will's hair, the signal that they're done. Will sits back on his haunches, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and stares into Hannibal's eyes. He's in another place, altered as a yogi murmuring Namaste. His own erection, ignored the entire time, long since faded into nothing.

Pure selflessness from Will Graham.

The beauty of the act and the beauty of Will in the firelight augments the afterglow. As he savors, Hannibal also records every detail of Will and himself, down to the interplay of the light between individual hairs on Will's head and the exact variation from normal in his plump lips.

Neither moves for a space of time Hannibal does not measure. Their breathing synchronizes. After a while, Will's lengthens. His eyes, already glazed, go opaque.

Hannibal sits up straight and tucks himself into his briefs before Will can fall asleep on his knees. Will blinks, slightly confused. Hannibal helps him up and onto the leather couch so blood can circulate to his legs. He runs a soft hand through Will's hair to say that he'll be back and goes to his bedroom, climbing the stairs slowly, to retrieve the muscle relaxant. When he returns with a glass of water, Will has fastened his pants and tipped his head back. Nearly asleep again.

Hannibal rouses him with a soft touch of his knee. Will takes the proffered water and drinks deeply.

"You slept well earlier?" Hannibal asks. "No bad dreams?"

"None that I remember," Will murmurs, his voice rough.

Hannibal opens his palm. "Sleep well again."

Will stares at the pill. "I don't think the first one's worn off yet."

Hannibal's mouth quirks. "Believe me, it has. You got up too soon. Shopped, prepared a fine meal. You deserve rest."

Will is easily persuaded tonight. He takes the pill with a swallow of water, then tries to push himself off the couch only to fall back against it. Hannibal offers a hand and helps Will to his feet where he sways and takes a step to catch himself.

Hannibal leans in to place a lengthy if chaste kiss on his carotid.

"Bed."

Will's lips curve into a tired smile and he stumbles out of the room and down the hall. Hannibal listens to the glide of fabric and shuffle of boots as he undresses, then the drop of his sleep-heavy body onto the bed. The sloughing off of boots and pants. Shifting onto the bed. The click of the lamp. Soft sounds of Will bedding down, arranging limbs and covers, then quiet.

Hannibal listens to the quiet for several minutes. Then, feeling sentimental, he takes down an age-worn first edition of Huygens' *Treatise on Light*, settles into his chair, and reads words he memorized long ago.

Under Me You So Quite New

Chapter Summary

> Will enjoys an early morning. Jack talks to Hannibal. Will takes a risk. Fromage fill 5 / 5.

i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric fur, and what-is-it comes
over parting flesh … And eyes big love-crumbs,

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new

- e.e. cummings, “i like my body when it is with your”

Will wakes slowly to dry clothes, a relaxed body, and a general state of warmth and comfort. No ringing in his ear; the ache there is so minor he hardly needs an aspirin. Much better. He reaches for his watch on the bedside table: not quite 6 a.m. Over eight hours uninterrupted. Such good sleep that he’s tenting his shorts, something that hasn’t happened often since he returned to the field.

He lies still and listens for noises from the kitchen, first with both ears, then with only the left. It’s hard to tell, listening to silence, but his hearing seems nearly normal. Nothing from the kitchen. Even the birds aren’t awake yet.

He frees himself from his shorts and considers his options. The drawer in the table conceals lube, a neat stack of condoms, and cloths: everything he needs. But Will half-hopes that something will happen tonight – if Hannibal feels up to it. He may. His method of sleeping through pain is sound. Will feels considerably better this morning than he expected. Muscle

relaxants. He'll remember that. And maybe by tonight, after Hannibal's had all day to rest, maybe then they can try…

He shrinks a little at the thought, doesn't want to say it even to himself. Hannibal makes it seem amazing. They're about the same size, so it could be amazing for him, too. He trusts Hannibal to go slowly and stop if he asks, but still… It will hurt at first and he's not sure he can handle that. Even if it's something he can do to help Hannibal feel like he's got control over his life. Of course, Hannibal doesn't seem all that phased by what happened and what he had to do. But he's not the kind of person who's open with his emotions. Good thing he has a real psychiatrist to help him through it.

Still, Will can't escape a sense of obligation to him. Hannibal helped him so much since he was shot. Before then, too. All Will has done is make dinner and apologize. Paltry offerings.

He sighs heavily, not sure what he should do.

Whatever happens, it'll be easier if he isn't antsy. It's been nearly a week – such a bad week that he hasn't felt like doing anything. He thinks back to Saturday and Sunday. He'd been so relaxed, touching himself for close to an hour Saturday night. He's at least that relaxed now and in far greater need of unburdening.

Maybe it's just going to be this way. Cases take so much out of him. If he's not too tired to feel amorous, he's too disturbed. Best to do this when the mood strikes.

Decision made, Will reaches for lube and a cloth, and conjures a fantasy. It has to be one about Hannibal. Not about the other. Not for a while. Just Hannibal now. He squeezes a few drops on his hand, rolls his fingers to warm the slick substance, and lets out a deep breath. It catches in his throat when he closes his hand around himself and remembers what it's like to feel good.

Been too long. Won't take much.

Experimentally, thinking of tonight, he imagines Hannibal bursting through the door with that wild look he gets when he's lost in pleasure. But this time with an aggressive, predatory glint in his eyes. His jacket is open, tie askew, vest undone, chest exposed beneath a half-buttoned shirt. Chest that's flushed and heaving. Eyes gone with desire. A shirt tail hanging out on one side, failing to hide the erection that strains against his trousers. Like a gift for Will to unwrap. A fringe of hair falls into Hannibal's eyes – his wild eyes, eyes that want, eyes that need. Eyes that say *You. Me. Now.*

Hannibal stalks forward and kneels on the bed where Will lies fisting himself and panting. He lets the thought form in his mind: Hannibal wants to fuck him.

Will bites his lip as blood surges, making him harder, making him leak onto his hand. Such a good thought. So dangerous. So exhilarating.

Hannibal, kneeling on the bed before Will, quickly pulls himself from his trousers and climbs between Will's legs. Bends kiss him roughly. Will's breath hitches. He wants Hannibal to kiss

him until he can't think about what comes next. He imagines Hannibal's lips on his, tongues tangling, the taste of Hannibal beneath wine and herbs. He's close. Not much more now.

Hannibal's talented hand slips down Will's thigh and teases – and a thought strikes Will.

He stops, reaches for the lube, and shakily squeezes it onto the fingers of his left hand, breathing fast, his orgasm already coiled in his belly and aching to spill out. Just the time to try doing more than he's done in the past. One finger, he's tried that and it was okay but nothing special. He's learned that he needs to stretch Hannibal with two fingers at least before he's ready to take Will's cock. If he's going to do this with Hannibal, he'll need to see what more than one feels like.

Will draws his legs up, curiosity and apprehension dimming the flame in his blood. He grips his cock and imagines his left hand is Hannibal's hand, knowledgeable and gentle. Fingers slick down his thigh, trailing past swollen balls, and find what they seek. One enters to the first knuckle, not bad, done this before, know what to expect – he shifts his hips – then further past the resistance and all the way in. He explores, crooking his finger, and finds – and gasps when a rocket of pleasure nearly sends him over. *Fuck*.

He withdraws his finger and gives himself a moment to regroup. That was good. Really good. He could get off that way easily. If Hannibal touched him there – *fuck*. He squeezes his eyes shut at the thought, endorphins racing through his body, orgasm coiling again in his belly.

Now the new thing. He takes a deep breath, pairs his fingers, and cautiously pushes in.

Full. Uncomfortable. Weird.

He clenches, wanting to expel the intrusion, but forces himself to stay in place and breathe. He strokes his cock, needing to feel good. To associate one sensation with another. He takes a deep, calming breath and slowly relaxes. It's uncomfortable but not bad. He pushes in further, slipping past the main joint in his finger. Bloom of pain, bright like an arterial spray. He breathes and it fades. All that's left is a curiously satisfying fullness. Like nothing he's felt before. It's more right than wrong, though not by much. Maybe because it's new and because he has a few culturally influenced hang-ups about it.

But if it's Hannibal. If it's Hannibal with his electricity and his magnetism and his perfect touch. Will feels himself relax around his fingers. If it's Hannibal, he trusts that it won't hurt much. That any pain will pass; that Hannibal will stop if it's too much. He's safe with Hannibal.

This couldn't – can't – won't – happen with anyone else. But with Hannibal. Yes, he decides. He can do this.

His muscles clench at the thought, more erotic than he expected it to be, and *oh* it feels good to do that. It feels good, too, because he realizes there's more going on between them than just friends with benefits.

Mostly that means the sex, already incredible, is about to get even better. That's all he needs to take himself in hand again. He pumps quickly, knowing as he has for many years the

combination to his own release, and crooks his fingers to find – there – *oh god*. He gasps and bites back a moan. So close.

Hannibal lies next to him, kissing intently while he lightly teases Will. Will's face contorts, hips and hands and cock straining, and one final light stroke and *oh god yes*. He explodes onto his stomach, coming in thick, hot stripes, muscles clenching around fingers.

God yes, he can do this.

Never had one like that before. Very different. Certainly pleasurable, if strange. Slipping his fingers out is at once a relief and a loss, a complex sensation he's not used to.

But he knows how amazing the tight heat of Hannibal feels around his cock. He wants to give that to Hannibal even if it means mixing pain with pleasure in a discomfiting way. He can take it for Hannibal. And if it's even half as good as what he just did, he'll take it with great pleasure.

Will cleans his hands with the cloth and wipes the semen from his belly. He wants to get up and wash his hands but he's far too relaxed now to move. Instead, he slides his legs down, draws the covers up to his chest, and closes his eyes. He thinks about Hannibal fucking him, wondering which position is best for his first time. He drifts off to sleep with a smile on his face.

After sharing a near-precise replica of the protein scramble Hannibal has fed Will in the past, Will drives them both to Quantico: Will because he has class and paperwork to do and Hannibal because Jack wants to interview him about the death of Tobias Budge. Will offers a sympathetic look as they get off the elevator and says, "I'll be back for dinner" with a rise at the end to make it a question. Hannibal smiles: yes. Will smiles, too, and blushes. Something is on his mind that he won't disclose. Something to do with sex.

Hannibal watches him go, curious about the secret Will's keeping from him, then turns toward Jack's office and sets aside his curiosity. He checks his watch: a few minutes early. He knocks on the glass anyway.

Jack stands, stern as ever, and waves him in.

"Ah, Dr. Lecter, thank you for coming," Jack says. Hannibal reads too many consecutive late nights in the bags under his eyes and in his pallor a worsening relationship with his wife.

"Please, have a seat," Jack says, sweeping a hand toward a chair.

"Thank you," Hannibal replies, folding himself delicately into a chair. Jack scrutinizes him, taking in the black eye and the cuts on his nose and mouth. Imagining what he can't see.

"How are you feeling?"

Fingers laced on the desk, sitting forward but not all the way. He's courteous but professional.

“Sore,” Hannibal answers truthfully. He pauses and looks contemplatively at nothing over Jack’s shoulder before meeting Jack’s eyes again.

“If I may ask, Agent Crawford, am I being charged with a crime?”

“No,” Jack answers in his quick, serious top-cop tone. “This is standard procedure in the case of a homicide.”

Too busy to be slightly warmer, Jack?

“I see.”

Jack uncaps a pen over a blank page on a yellow legal pad, the kind Will also prefers for note taking. Unimaginative, utilitarian. Hannibal sees upside down forensics reports spread out on his desk along with photos of his office as a crime scene.

“I’m going to ask you some questions,” Jack begins. “I’d appreciate your complete honesty.”

“You shall have it,” Hannibal says sincerely.

“Good.” No smile. “Let’s start with Tobias Budge. When did you first meet Tobias Budge?”

“At the opera,” Hannibal answers easily. He crosses his legs, the right over the left, ignoring the spike of pain, and folds his hands in his lap: the interested but comfortable posture he uses on his patients. “Two and a half weeks ago. He accompanied Franklyn.”

“Yes, Mr. Froideveaux,” Jack says, taking notes while barely breaking eye contact, reading everything like a human lie detector. “Could you tell me about him?”

“As you know, doctor-patient confidentiality limits what I can say.” Jack’s expression turns doubtful but he doesn’t interrupt. “Franklyn posed no threat to me or anyone else. Certainly not to Mr. Budge. He was a harmless neurotic with a tendency to fixate on his therapists. He had seen nine other doctors before me. I’m afraid I was in the middle of referring him to yet another doctor when Mr. Budge interrupted his session.”

Jack’s pen pauses. “Referring him because he fixated on you?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answers. Slight swing of his right foot so as not to be unnaturally still. “A mild form of stalking, though I hesitate to use the word. Franklyn meant no harm.”

“You never felt threatened by him.”

“Never.”

“How did Franklyn know Budge?”

Hannibal takes a breath and pretends to search his memory. “They were friends. The circumstances of their acquaintance never came up beyond something vague about a garden party.”

Jack looks incredulous. “Just friends?”

Hannibal inclines his head to acknowledge Jack’s suspicion. “As far as I know.”

Jack seems far from satisfied but moves on to the next question. “Did you have any contact with Budge other than at the opera and when he came to your office yesterday?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answers. “I visited his shop on Tuesday. My harpsichord needed new strings.”

“How did you know he owned a string shop?”

“Franklyn mentioned Mr. Budge’s business during one of our sessions.”

“Why did you choose his shop?”

“I was curious about him.” Another shake of the ankle. “Franklyn seemed very invested in their relationship. I thought that I might assess Mr. Budge myself so I could better help Franklyn.”

“And what was your assessment?”

“Mr. Budge was polite. Cordial. Professional.”

“Nothing about him seemed amiss to you?”

“No.”

Jack pauses to take notes, then shuffles through papers. “Will told me that you told him about Tobias Budge on…Tuesday night. What did you say to Will?”

“Franklyn told me that morning that he suspected Mr. Budge of committing the murder at the symphony. Mr. Budge told Franklyn he wanted to cut someone’s throat and play it like a violin." Hannibal cocks his head as if checking his memory. "I believe those were Franklyn’s exact words.”

Jack’s eyebrows jump, wrinkling his forehead. “You went to his shop before or after Franklyn told you that?”

Hannibal’s expression turns troubled at Jack’s insinuation. “Before, of course.”

“You encouraged him to report Budge?”

“I did. Franklyn worried that he was wrong. He did not want to implicate his friend.”

“And so you told Will about it.”

Hannibal nods. “As he was investigating the murder, Will seemed an obvious choice.”

Jack concedes the point. “In what context did you mention this detail to Will?”

Hannibal takes a deep breath and looks over Jack's shoulder as though he's recalling details. "Will came to see me on Tuesday night because he heard an animal trapped in his chimney," Hannibal says, looking back at Jack. "He removed bricks from the chimney but did not find an animal. He realized later that there was no animal. The event…rattled him. Perhaps because he did not realize right away that he had imagined the animal. He was concerned about his mental health; he came to see me."

Jack rolls the pen between his fingers and gives Hannibal his best no-nonsense look. "But you don't seem concerned."

Hannibal tilts his head. "I am always concerned about Will's mental health, Agent Crawford. In this case, I attributed the incident to stress. He's been working hard since he returned. He may need another break."

Jack's jaw works back and forth. He taps the pen on the pad and sighs. "Will thought he heard a dog hit by a car when he was interviewing Budge. He left the shop. Went out into the street. Didn't find a dog. When he returned, Budge had killed both of the officers. Will tracked him to the basement where Budge nearly killed him."

Hannibal cocks his head and looks deeply troubled. "He did not tell me the circumstances under which the officers died." Hannibal takes a deep breath and makes a show of considering the new information.

"You still think it's stress?"

Hannibal waits a beat before he answers. "Yes. Will has had a subtype of post-traumatic stress injury since he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Being shot exacerbated his condition. Perhaps his return to the field was premature. Sounds like he's endangering others. And himself."

Jack sighs but remains stolid even as he taps the pen on the legal pad. "I wouldn't keep him out there if I didn't need him. He saves lives."

Hannibal inclines his head to imply that he respects Jack's judgment.

Jack folds his hands. "In the future, I'd appreciate it if you tell me instead of Will any information pertaining to an open investigation."

Hannibal inclines his head again.

"I want to return to what happened yesterday in your office. You were having a session with Franklyn…"

"Yes," Hannibal says, uncrossing his legs and switching so the left rests on the right. He feels the butterfly closures holding the stab wound together pull at his skin. "I was referring Franklyn to another doctor when Mr. Budge walked in. His ear was mangled. He said he'd come to say goodbye to Franklyn. He confessed to killing two men. Franklyn encouraged him to turn himself in. I told Franklyn to leave. I feared Mr. Budge might become violent

toward him. Mr. Budge told him to stay. Franklyn tried again to convince Mr. Budge to give himself up when Mr. Budge snapped his neck."

Hannibal pauses and allows a subtle mix of disgust, outrage, and sorrow to show on his face.

"I also tried to reason with Mr. Budge. He attacked me. First with strings I believe he planned to use as a garrote. Then – " His eyes shift back and forth, focused on the desk, as though he's remembering. He looks up at Jack. "It happened fast. I don't recall everything." He stops again and frowns. "I wished Mr. Budge no harm. He forced me to defend myself."

Jack looks sympathetic. "Do you remember how you killed him?" he asks, his tone slightly softer.

"Yes," Hannibal whispers, retreating within himself to appear to be remembering in detail. He takes a slightly shaky breath and allows his eyes to water. "I knew after a while that he would not stop until I was dead. I began to look for an opening. He gave me one when he stuck his arm through the ladder. I wrenched it and he fell to his knees. I punched his throat to immobilize him. As he fell, he kicked the pedestal on which I keep a statuette of a red deer. It landed on the back of his head. I thought he was unconscious… but when I felt for his pulse…"

He looks down at his hands, takes another deep breath, and looks back up at Jack. "I had hoped to stop him and call for help. I never imagined this would happen."

Sympathy relaxes Jack's face. "Despite our best intentions, these things do happen from time to time."

Hannibal nods, still giving the appearance of being shaken up.

Jack looks down at his notes again. "The forensic evidence corroborates your story. You're guilty of no crime. No charges will be filed."

Hannibal nods again, showing relief appropriate to an innocent man largely ignorant of the law.

"I understand that the crime scene cleaners will finish their work in your office this afternoon," Jack says. "Have you thought about when you might return to practice?"

"Soon, I hope," Hannibal answers, recovering from his emotional display. "Returning to a routine after a traumatic event helps a person regain a sense of normalcy."

Jack's face shows his understanding as he nods. "We weren't able to keep it out of the papers, but Freddie Lounds has been busy with other stories, so I doubt it will be sensationalized. Still, I hope you don't lose patients over it."

"Me, too," Hannibal agrees.

Jack studies him for a moment. "You seem to be coping well."

"As well as can be expected," Hannibal replies with a slight smile.

“And Will?” Jack asks. “I understand you drove here together?”

“Yes. Will left his car here.”

“How is he doing?”

Hannibal sighs. “He feels guilty. He views his inability to stop Mr. Budge as a failure and blames himself for the attack on me.”

Jack’s jaw clenches again. “You’re disabusing him of this notion?”

“As best I can.”

Jack nods, apparently satisfied. He stands. Hannibal joins him.

“Thank you for coming, doctor,” Jack says, extending his hand.

Hannibal shakes it. “You’re welcome.” He turns to leave.

“Ah, doctor…”

Hannibal stops and turns.

“I’m glad you’re okay. Keep me updated on Will.”

“Of course.”

They exchange small smiles and Hannibal leaves. He has no plans to linger in the halls, as his black eye attracts attention, but he does pass by the forensics lab on his way to the elevator. Will, his back turned, is examining a corpse – Tobias’, judging by the feet – and talking with three other people. Hannibal reads tension in his posture. Nothing abnormal, but tension nonetheless. Still, he does not expect Will to look too closely at Tobias. Will doesn’t want to think about what happened. If the breakfast he made and his silence in the car are any indication, guilt still gnaws at him. He will not see because he will not really look.

Hannibal returns to Baltimore, makes an easy lunch, and takes a nap, courtesy of one of the hydrocodone left over from Will’s recuperation, then gets up, enjoys a leisurely soak, and spends a few hours in the study composing a drawing of last night. He wants to capture the glow of the firelight on Will’s skin as best he can with nothing but a pencil. He chooses a third person point of view, looking at Will’s back with the fireplace casting light at a forty-five degree angle from beyond the left side of the frame. Though Will was dressed, Hannibal draws him nude, taking care to render each muscle precisely, from his bent back and shoulders to the masculine curve of his ass. Will dominates the frame, his hair and feet circumscribing its top and bottom. Hannibal draws him in the style of the 19th century academy works by Louis Lagrenée and Pierre-Paul Prud'hon but with the sensibility of Robert Mapplethorpe. The play of light and shadow and the focus on Will allow him to hint at himself in the chair, drawing in detail only his hands gripping the chair’s arms to show the effect of Will’s devotion. To an outsider, it would appear to be a faceless erotic sketch, tastefully focused on the male body in firelight. Only Will would recognize it.

At 7 p.m., Hannibal sets it aside, half-concealed under a first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

He swallows ibuprofen for his aches, trades pajamas for trousers and a plain oxford, and sets about readying the mise-en-place for dinner. He's half finished when the doorbell rings. Will is tired, nervous, and smelling of dog when he enters: he's been by his house; he intends to stay tonight. Will offers a smile in an attempt to cover but manages only to look more nervous. It's the same thing he was nervous about this morning. Something sexual. Something he wants to do. Something he's uncertain about.

Of course.

Will still thinks of himself as a straight man despite of the weeks they've spent as sexual partners. But now he wants to try bottoming. Perhaps it's guilt forcing the issue; perhaps he's wanted to do this for a while but hasn't had the nerve. Whatever the cause of his sudden interest, Hannibal is eager to see how he reacts to this self-imposed challenge to his sexual identity, and even more eager to get Will into bed where he will show Will exactly what he's been missing. Desire pools just above his groin.

Hannibal smiles at him as he hangs up his jacket. Will smiles back nervously and follows him to the kitchen where he washes his hands, takes an eggplant to the butcher's block, inquires about the cut, and gets to work. Hannibal watches him surreptitiously. His knife slips more than once due to a subtle tremor in his hands.

"What's on your mind, Will?" Hannibal asks casually.

Will's head jerks up. A blush spreads to his cheeks. Wasn't paying attention. Didn't expect Hannibal to notice.

"Uh…" Will stalls, "I was, ah, just thinking…" Hannibal sees him wondering whether he should lie. "…about something…" He taps the knife on the block. "I'd… ah, like to try."

Bashful. Inarticulate. Determined.

"What something is that?"

Will blows out a breath, shakes his head, and takes a long drink of wine.

"If you're feeling up to it… I thought we might…" He fidgets, nearly spilling the wine, then takes another long drink. "But if you're not, that's okay…"

"What is it you want to try, Will?" Hannibal asks calmly.

Hands fluttering, nearly knocking the glass over. Quick, unsteady breaths.

"I thought…" hand grips the glass, shifts his weight, "maybe I could, uh…" scratches his head, looks away, "um…" voice fades, the last word hardly audible, "receive."

"Receive what?"

Will flushes bright red, half-embarrassed, half-angry. “You know what I’m talking about,” he mumbles, slicing the eggplant with undue ferocity.

“I want to hear you say it,” Hannibal says with a suggestive narrowing of his eyes.

Frustrated, Will puts the knife down, drains the wine from his glass, looks over Hannibal’s shoulder, and says, “Your c-c – you.”

He pours more wine, his eyes flashing *is that good enough?* at Hannibal before guilt quashes anger and he turns nervous again.

“But I mean, if you’re not feeling – ”

“I’d like to try that, too,” Hannibal interrupts, his lower, richer voice cutting under Will’s high, anxious tone.

Will nods, lets out a breath, and takes another drink. He’s as skittish as an unbroken colt. No matter. Hannibal intends to go as slowly as Will needs him to go and to say the words Will needs to hear to be comfortable. He wants Will to enjoy bottoming as an act of trust. Wants Will to learn how empowering it is to grant one’s partner intimate access. That control works both ways. That when he gives into his urges, good things come to him.

Will flees the room to set the table. Hannibal, too, takes a deep breath. The very idea of doing this to Will tonight – and it has to be tonight; Will is ready – gets him uncomfortably hard. He can’t undertake the performance of cooking with more blood in his cock than his head, so he breathes and savors the wine until his blood is back where he needs it.

Will returns in time to watch most of the performance and to help when Hannibal asks with a glance for this or that ingredient. He’s become a competent assistant. Hannibal can easily imagine years of dinners with Will – and now that Will wishes to broaden his sexual experience, he’s one step closer to becoming the equal Hannibal desires. If he is very, very lucky, Hannibal muses as he adds crème de cassis and leans back when flames leap into the air, Will may one day satisfy all of his urges and deny no aspect of his being. Perhaps one day Will will cook one of his harvests and Hannibal will lean casually against the butcher’s block with a glass of wine and observe, and they will take turns afterward giving and receiving pleasure until they’re both too tired to move.

Hannibal smiles at Will as the flames consume the liqueur and infuse flavor in the sauce. Will, still embarrassed and now a little drunk, scratches his head and looks away with a slight smile.

Will watches Hannibal plate their dinner, nodding and smiling and cocking his head as though he’s carrying on a conversation with himself about the elaborate and, to his thinking, unnecessary arrangement of non-edible items: a center-cut chambered nautilus and dark red gladiolus. The flower’s association with honor and conviction will be lost on Will, though he’ll understand the color and perhaps the shape.

They carry their plates and sit and eat, Will paying his usual compliments to the food.

“I hope Jack wasn’t too hard on you this morning,” Will says, having waited his customary four bites to speak.

“Not at all,” Hannibal replies. “He said my office is ready for my return. Perhaps tomorrow.”

Will raises his eyebrows. “Seems a little soon. Maybe you should wait until that fades.” He nods to Hannibal’s eye. “Wouldn’t want to scare your patients.”

Hannibal sniffs with amusement. “I meant I’ll stop by tomorrow. Need to order a new table.” He kinks the arm over which Tobias smashed the old table.

Will winces sympathetically. “Going to see your unconventional psychiatrist about it first?”

“About my choice of décor?” Hannibal teases.

Will rolls his eyes.

“Yes,” Hannibal answers. “Also tomorrow.”

Will nods, pleased with the answer. Hannibal can almost see some of his guilt dissipate from his body. His concern for Hannibal’s mental health is touching.

After that, they speak only in gazes, glances, and gestures. Hannibal encourages Will to drink more wine by selecting a second bottle and liberally filling his glass. Will’s eyes say he knows and appreciates what Hannibal’s doing, plying him with wine to relax him. Hannibal’s mouth curls into a smile. He will be entirely honest with Will tonight.

By the time the nautilus and gladiolus are the only things left on their plates, Will is drunk enough to stumble when he gets up but not so drunk he can’t catch himself. He smiles at his clumsiness and follows Hannibal to the kitchen with his plate and glass, skipping right to the dishes. Not waiting on food for dessert. Hannibal agrees. It’s time. But he wants to clarify a few things - and he wants Will to ask.

Will squares to face Hannibal before the dishes are half-done, reaches out to touch Hannibal’s shoulder, and hesitates, confusion on his face. Hannibal turns off the water, dries his hands, and faces Will.

“How’s this supposed to work? I’m not even sure where I can touch you without – ”

Hannibal silences him with a kiss. A long, serious kiss full of promises he will keep.

When he lets Will go so they can both breathe, he says, “Keep your hands on my hips and you won’t hurt me.”

Will nods, desire brimming in his eyes. He’s been thinking about this all day. Probably thought about it this morning when he masturbated.

That thought gets Hannibal’s blood moving. He kisses Will again, just as deeply, running his hands down Will’s back to his hips. He slots his body against Will’s and kisses him until he's loose and pliant with endorphins.

Hannibal pulls back and smiles at Will. Will's relaxation turns wild and dangerous with desire. Hannibal leans into Will and pushes him into motion toward the bedroom, starting in on Will's shirt buttons. Will swats his hand and takes over, stopping against the room's door jamb. Will pulls him into a kiss, sliding his hands down to Hannibal's hips and bucking into him. Hannibal kisses him furiously, excited by how much Will seems to want this.

Hannibal pulls Will up and encourages him toward the bed as Will's hands fly over his belt and jeans. Hannibal leaves his clothes on, letting his pants and briefs down just enough to show Will his excitement.

Will hesitates, running his eyes over Hannibal's clothed body. "You don't want me to see you."

"No," Hannibal answers truthfully. "But I want to do this. I'll stop if it hurts too much. Either of us."

Hannibal makes a show of stroking his cock while Will decides. Will, careful where he puts his hands, kisses Hannibal gently but with serious intent. Hannibal deepens the kiss, knowing that Will feels safest when he's kissing, that kissing intoxicates him more than anything else.

Hannibal encourages Will to kneel on the bed. Hannibal joins him. Will is just sloppy enough that Hannibal has to ask. He pulls back, searching Will's eyes, a hand in Will's hair. "You're not too drunk?"

"No," Will answers firmly, "not too drunk."

"Good," Hannibal replies, slowly running his hand from Will's hair to his neck and then his shoulder while he kisses Will. "You have…" Chest, stomach. Deep kiss. "Compete control…" Hip, ass. Kiss. "Over this." Light squeeze. Pause until Will opens his eyes. "Just say stop and I'll stop."

Will probes Hannibal's expression, looking for something to mistrust. Finding nothing, he fetches the lube and a condom, both of which he gives to Hannibal.

Hannibal kisses him thoroughly again, feeling Will's muscles slowly melt. Hannibal slicks his fingers and works Will's cock first, gently stroking while he continues to kiss. He lets Will take the lead with his mouth, kissing back in kind but not pursuing when Will wants a break. He strokes Will through one break and into another round of kissing. Lets Will tangle a hand in his hair, encourages him with a little moan. At length, his hand slows, stops, and dips down, giving Will plenty of time to balk all while urging him not to with lips and tongue.

Will turns onto his back and spreads his legs, his hand on Hannibal's neck to draw Hannibal down with him. Hannibal drapes a leg over Will's to hold himself up and waits a few beats before slipping his finger inside. Will digs into his neck and kisses more urgently as he rides out a tremor of fear. The tremulous moment passes and he relaxes again, relieved, and lets his head fall to the pillow. He closes his eyes to breathe and feel; Hannibal watches, enraptured.

This may be the most trusting thing Will Graham has ever done.

And, because Will's trust incites passion in Hannibal, one of the most dangerous.

Hannibal takes a steadying breath while Will adjusts. When he's ready, Hannibal slowly tests him, sliding his finger in and out, reading *strange-weird-different-not bad-good-okay-good-yes-more-yes* as Will's face furrows then smooths then contorts with pleasure. Hannibal's pulse quickens. Only Will does that to him. Nothing else. No one else. Just Will.

Hannibal studies Will more carefully as he crooks his finger to gently brush Will's prostate. Will gasps and clenches and gasps again, grabbing the duvet with both fists, his back arching and cock jerking: electric shock. After the sensation crests, Will's hand twitches next to Hannibal. He wants to touch himself. Knows he can't. Not yet.

He liked that. Well, his body liked it. But Hannibal suspects it's difficult for his mind. Will's reaction scares him on some level. Perhaps because he can't fully anticipate it and hence can't fully control it. He's never been this vulnerable sexually. It's a short trip from vulnerability to fear, and fear to Will Graham means the violent crimes that both fascinate and repel him.

Hannibal smiles. In exchange for a little vulnerability, he's going to give Will mind-blowing pleasure. More than he's ever experienced. His reward for opening himself to Hannibal. For indulging his urges.

Hannibal tickles him again. Will's hand flies to his neck where his nails bite into flesh as the sensation washes over him.

"Don't tease," Will chokes.

Hannibal heeds his request, resuming his slow fingering and leaning down for a kiss. Will kisses back greedily, hungrily, needing the safe haven. After a while, he realizes he can contribute to the rhythm. He keeps his eyes closed, enjoying the sensation. He stops kissing to catch his breath, lips parted, concentrates on what he feels.

At length, he looks up at Hannibal through eyes that ask for only one thing: *more*.

Hannibal smiles and moves his hand to lightly stroke Will's cock. Will gasps and catches his wrist to stop him. Sensitive. Hannibal moves his hand to Will's chest and feels the rapid thump of his heart beneath sweaty skin. Sex hangs heady in the warm air between them.

When Will opens his eyes again, there's no trace of concern. Just raw desire. He pulls Hannibal into a urgent kiss, then moves Hannibal's hand down to his ass. Impatient. Nervous but too aroused to really care. Wanting to get past fear to pleasure.

Hannibal obliges, slowly sliding in two fingers, dipping his head to kiss Will's neck so Will has a familiar point of pleasure. Will tilts his head back, giving Hannibal more access. His half-stifled moan at feeling too full catches in his throat below Hannibal's lips. Hannibal kisses cartilage, traveling up from cricoid to thyroid to hyoid. The stubbled triangle of his jaw. Hannibal moves up to brush back Will's hair, urging Will, who knows what's coming, to relax.

At the moment of pain, Hannibal gently kisses Will's cheek and then his forehead, a hand in Will's hair. Safety.

When he feels Will's body tense around his fingers as his muscles jolt and quiver, breath hitching, Hannibal lowers his head to suck an ear lobe, one of Will's most sensitive spots. His breathing lengthens as endorphins mask pain. He begins to relax around Hannibal's still fingers; Hannibal encourages him with languid kisses of the carotid.

Careful. Gentle. Slow. Endlessly patient.

Will needs that from him. He takes a while to adjust. When he's ready, he opens his eyes and reaches for Hannibal to kiss him deeply, slowly, leisurely. Hannibal feels Will imbibe until he's drunk on dopamine, then moves his fingers, slowly, in and out. Strung out on chemicals, Will breaks the kiss to moan at the sensation, dropping his head against Hannibal's shoulder and reaching for his hip. He squeezes to let Hannibal know how good it feels, not intending to leave the bruises Hannibal will notice in the morning.

Will reaches blindly for the lube, finds it, and runs a slick hand down Hannibal's cock, his face buried against Hannibal's shoulder, curls tickling Hannibal's nose. Hannibal adjusts until he can breathe the scent of Will's hair: his fragrance in concert with his natural scent, strong next to his scalp, earthy and sweet and something more. As Hannibal catalogs his scent, Will matches Hannibal's rhythm, stroking Hannibal with the assurance of a man who knows how to get his partner off with one hand.

He wants Hannibal to catch up, to be as gone as he is. With Will's tight heat around his fingers and expert hand around his cock, Hannibal joins him quickly. He moans into Will's hair and slows his rhythm to begin stretching Will. Will's hands slows, too, as he braces himself for pain he's too hormone-flooded to feel. He relaxes in its absence and his strokes become a counterpoint to Hannibal opening him.

Hannibal can't help himself. Once Will is ready, he slips his fingers up to caress Will's prostate again so he can feel Will shudder intensely against him, hear his groan of pure pleasure. How easily he could make Will beg for mercy. Instead, he shoves his fingers up again, just a little roughly, and Will curses into his shoulder as he shudders again.

Will pulls away and fixes a primal, unblinking gaze on Hannibal. It's a challenge. It says the only thing Will needs to say: *Now*.

They part so Will can shove a pillow under his hips while Hannibal slips on a condom and lubes himself liberally. Hannibal's entire body protests his movement, but like Will, he's too intoxicated to care. He gets into position, his trousers slipping further down his legs, and watches Will closely for any sign of reticence or alarm. Will's stare still challenges as much as it invites, saying *You're mine. I'm yours. If you take me*. Hannibal's eyes answer *yes* as he pushes in. Slowly. Just the head – *so tight, so hot* – as Will takes deep, steadying breaths. Still staring. Hannibal slides in further until he's halfway there. Will swallows heavily, his Adam's apple bobbing, a tiny glint of worry in his expression. Hannibal stops and strokes Will's cock just enough to fire more dopamine. Will nods and closes his eyes, head back with pleasure again, and Hannibal pushes steadily until Will takes all of him.

Hot. Tight. It’s been too long since he’s done this. He stops stroking Will and places both palms on the bed so he can bend down and kiss Will. He tells Will everything this means to him with lips and tongue and teeth: his appreciation of Will’s trust, his fondness for Will, his desire for every part of Will, his passion and lust, his devotion. Will says much the same back, though with more urgency.

They part, breathing heavily, flushed, and Hannibal memorizes everything before he moves his hips.

Relaxed, Will takes the movement and the new pleasure and the significance as best he can, trying to watch but from time to time having to toss his head back and shut his eyes. Hannibal holds on as Will writhes beneath him, indecent noises wrung from Will's throat. Hannibal uses most of his control to keep the rhythm steady, but both of them are already embarrassingly close.

Will holds onto fistfuls of the duvet until his knuckles are white, doing everything in his power not to touch himself. He desperately wants to. Hannibal sees it in his wrecked expression when he opens his eyes. But he wants to wait as long as he can.

Hannibal pushes in deeply and stops and bends to kiss Will again. Will’s hands fly into his hair as Will lifts up to meet him, his mouth raw and needy. Hannibal savors the sensation from every nerve touching Will, but most especially of the tight, hot muscles clenching around him.

Slowly, reluctantly, knowing this will be the last rut, Hannibal pulls away from Will. He encourages Will with a hand to wrap his legs loosely around Hannibal’s body – there, slightly deeper. He waits for Will to cant his hips, then lets Will control the pace until they’re both ready for more. Hannibal checks him with a push forward, waits for him to still, and pumps in as fast and hard as he thinks Will can take. Will cries out and tries to match his pace, fails, and then with his eyes shut, mouth an O, and hands pressed against the headboard to keep himself in place, Will just lets Hannibal fuck him.

Will lasts less than a minute, teeth on edge, holding out until he has to touch himself. A few pumps and he comes with a shout all over himself. Hannibal watches, feels himself slip, and gives in, tumbling after Will, coming deep inside him. His muscles shake as orgasm leaves him. He holds on to the condom and collapses onto the bed next to Will, drenched in sweat he doesn’t recall noticing before now. Will is no better off, flushed red and panting, legs still drawn up and ass open. With a clumsy hand, he yanks the pillow out from under his hips and lets his legs fall flat.

Neither moves for a few minutes.

Eventually, Will digs out cloths and splits them up. Hannibal wraps the condom in a cloth and leaves it for Will to throw away later. He doesn’t want to move for at least five more minutes. He shouldn’t do this, lie here next to Will and share the afterglow, but he won’t deny himself the pleasure.

Hannibal listens to Will breathe. Listens to his pulse slow. Listens to his contentment.

After a while, Will sighs. “Wow.”

“Mmm.”

“I see why you like it.”

Hannibal hums in agreement again. If he didn’t hurt, he’d stay here much longer. Maybe he will anyway. Even if it’s dangerous.

He closes his eyes and listens to Will. Hears silence and contentment for another handful of minutes.

Hears Will shift and begin to think.

“Do you want to stay here tonight?”

His tone is guarded, willing to share or vacate the bed.

“I can get your pills, some clothes…”

Hannibal opens his eyes. Will gazes at him through drooping lids. So tempting.

Hannibal sits up slowly and gets to his feet, pulling his trousers up around his hips and buttoning them.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal says. “I’m all right. I’ll be asleep soon.”

Will nods, frowning at the acknowledgement of pain. Hannibal leans over to give him another kiss.

“It was worth it.”

That draws a smile from Will. They exchange goodnights and Hannibal eases his way into the kitchen. He takes a moment to transfer the dessert from the oven to the refrigerator and turn the oven off before heading upstairs. Will can handle the dishes in the morning.

He swallows a muscle relaxant and ibuprofen right away, then slowly undresses, starting with his shirt. He ignores the purple mass of bruises coloring sixty percent of his torso other than to slather arnica gel on the worst of them. When he removes his trousers, he finds he’s bled through the dressing on his leg. Puncture wound. Easy to reopen. He sits to clean and dress it again, but pauses first, dabbing a fresh drop of blood on his index finger and putting it to his mouth.

Hannibal smiles.

The Only Fact of Life

Chapter Summary

Trou Normand 1 / 3. The totem pole. The lost time. The aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Did you miss hurt/comfort as much as I did?

A totem pole of people, Jack said.

Madness bleeds into Will’s head before he lays eyes on the thing. Then it spills over and touches everything inside him. Slick and gelatinous and thick-smelling. Tar.

Toxic.

Screams he can see rather than hear assault him, ratcheting up the headache he’s had since yesterday. Will swallows two more aspirin to quell the fear as he and Jack approach the monolith.

Massive. Took time to assemble, to gather the bodies. A lifetime.

Jack tells him details he’s already absorbed: freshest kill at the top in the position of honor, older kills toward the bottom, suggesting a timeline. A lifetime of malice.

Jack thinks the graves were defiled. No, not defiled. Merely uncovered. Exposed. He’s been waiting for this his whole life.

Will looks up and takes in everything he needs to know and will never be able to forget. A vision of nightmares to come.

His heart thumps louder in his ears. Screams zip, pop, and crackle like the high pitched crunch of bone. Such force in the hacking and sawing and rending. Such despair. Hatred. Evil.

He’s doing it before he tries to look. It’s inside him before he seeks it.

Will's chest constricts, stomach roils. He tastes blood.

An idle thought skates over the surface of his mind. *Not much of a smell this time. Thank god for winter*.

Faintly, he hears Jack tell everyone to leave. His cue. Time to dance again with fear.

Will steels himself as he walks fifteen yards away. Old hand at fear. Nothing he hasn't seen before. Just variations of madness.

Just do this and get on with it. Shake it off later.

Will removes his glasses so he can see.

Calm. Steady. Stable.

He takes a breath – *calm* – exhales forcefully – *steady* – slowly closes his eyes.

Three.

Two.

One.

Will dives down into the dark, still place inside. For a moment, he's alone in the darkness.

The crime scene appears before him. The totem in all its taboo.

Beat.

The parts before final assembly.

Beat.

Blank nothing no one –

Now

Will inhales as the killer and opens his eyes. Looks. Sees. Steps forward toward his lifetime of work.

"I planned this moment, this monument with precision."

He walks with confidence the ground he's chosen to hallow with his creation, stepping between bodies that mean little to him now.

Just parts.

Just pieces.

"Collected all my raw materials in advance."

A hunter.

A gather.

A craftsman.

An artist.

A puzzle to be assembled. But not a puzzle to him. No. He's been thinking for years about this afternoon on the beach. This sacred time to breathe life into his creation.

He spots a torso on the ground. The next piece. He slips his arms under it, digging into the sand, and lifts it with difficulty.

Flesh heavier frozen than fresh.

His back strains as he lifts; he grunts with the effort. Has to steady it with both hands so it won't rock and fall.

"I position the bodies carefully, cording each in its rightful place."

Arm. Someone's arm. Wrap it tight. Wrap it right.

"Piece. And the pieces disassembled."

Vigorous tugs. Only one chance to get this right.

Then they'll see what I've done.

He hears the struggling before he sees its source.

Yes. There. Fresh.

The headpiece. Trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

"My latest victim I save for last."

Wrap the rope right. Tug and pull. All of his strength. None needed after this.

The headpiece wriggles, trying to make noise over the duct tape. Pitiful. Wretched.

"I want him to watch me work."

Pull harder. Tighter. Tightest.

"I want him to know my design."

There. Finished. Ready.

He unsheathes a hunting knife and stalks to the terrified lump of flesh. Kicks him onto his back. Straddles him. Stabs him brutally, efficiently in the heart. One thrust.

I want you to see me.

Life leaves the flailing flesh. Doesn't fight, doesn't linger. Goes down easy. Hardly worthy of being the headpiece.

Blood pools over the sand as he stands, triumphant, nearly finished. His creation unfolds before him, massive, meticulous, malevolent.

His heart thumps arrhythmically in his ears.

"This is my résumé."

Beat.

"This is my body of work."

Beat.

"This is my legacy."

Beat.

A drop of blood.

Beat.

Will opens his eyes.

No beach.

No totem.

Hannibal's waiting room.

Confusion.

Spike of fear.

Everything is loud in his head. He can't focus with the room shifting back and forth.

Inhale.

Scent matches.

Real?

Real.

"Will. I wasn't expecting you."

Hannibal.

Exhale.

Coming out of his office.

Real?

Real.

Inhale.

Fear like bile rises in his throat.

“Something’s wrong,” he hears himself say.

He’s moving into the office before he realizes it, sweeping past Hannibal like he isn’t there.

Inhale.

No beach.

No Jack.

No totem.

Just suddenly here.

What happened?

No memory. Only blankness. Only a drop of blood and opening his eyes in Hannibal’s waiting room. Nothing.

Exhale.

“I don’t know how I got here.”

He hears how frantic he sounds. His memory is blank. Nothing. Fear floods his mouth and nose with blood and iron.

“Your car is outside, so we know you drove.”

Hannibal's talking. Hannibal’s here. Hannibal’s real.

“I – I was on a beach in Grafton, West Virginia, I blinked, and then – and now I was waking up in your waiting room except I wasn’t asleep.”

His blood pounds. Fear tightens his chest so he can’t breathe. He has to move, has to keep moving.

“Grafton, West Virginia, is three and a half hours from here.”

Hannibal’s calm voice.

“You lost time.”

Lost time? Will stops and turns behind the desk.

“I – there is something wrong with me.”

“You’re disassociating, Will. It’s a desperate survival mechanism for a psyche that endures repeated abuse.”

“No, no – I’m not abused!”

“You have an empathy disorder,” Hannibal argues. “What you feel is overwhelming you.”

“I know I know I know.”

It’s why he can’t sit still, why he has to walk out of his own skin to get away from the intense fear, the screams in the air, the revulsion in his stomach.

“And you choose to ignore it. That’s the abuse I’m referring to.”

No, no, wrong, no.

“Wh-wh-wh-what, do you want me to quit?”

“Well, Jack Crawford gave you a chance to quit and you didn’t take it. Why?”

Will stops, nods his head, feels the ground coming back under him.

“I save lives,” Will spells out.

“And that feels good.”

“Generally speaking, yeah.”

“What about your life?”

“Huh?”

“I’m your friend, Will. I don’t care about the lives you save. I care about your life. And your life is separating from reality.”

Hannibal's concern knocks his knees out from under him. He has to sit.

He’s sick. That's it. Sick. Didn’t feel well yesterday. So tired. Felt like he was getting a cold. Went to bed early. Slept like shit. Familiar horrors painted in increasingly lurid shades inside his eyelids.

Will presses his hands to his face, trying to make everything go away. This isn’t him breaking. It’s something else.

“I’ve been sleepwalking.”

Twice last week.

“I’m experiencing hallucinations.”

So many. So strong. Drove Alana from him.

Fear lurches inside.

“Maybe I should get a brain scan.”

“Will!”

Hannibal. Hannibal’s there. Adamant.

“Stop looking in the wrong corner for an answer to this.”

Will sits back, disbelieving. He doesn’t think it’s worth checking? Why not? Why doesn’t he –

“You were at the crime scene when you disassociated. Tell me about it.”

Revulsion rises like vomit.

“It was a totem pole of bodies.”

He sees each one, each piece. Feels the construction of it in his muscles. Feels himself stabbing the last victim. Feels the screams inside his head.

“In some cultures, crimes and guilt are made to manifest so everyone can see them and see their shame.”

“No,” Will says, “this isn’t shame, this is celebration. He’s marking his achievements.”

He speaks coldly as the Will Graham who works for Jack Crawford, the man who puts away fear in the moment so another Will Graham can wake up terrified at night.

“When faced with this killer’s achievements, your mind needed to escape. And you lost time.”

Splash of fear. “Yes.”

Hannibal pauses. Will's heart thumps in his ears.

“I’m worried about you, Will. You empathize so completely with the killers Jack Crawford has your mind wrapped around that you lose yourself to them. What if you lose time and hurt yourself? Or someone else?”

Will shakes his head, no, that’s not possible, he wouldn’t do that. He looks up at Hannibal. Concerned Hannibal. Wants what’s best.

“I don’t want you to wake up and see a totem of your own making.”

No, no, not possible, no. Will thinks nothing but *no* for some time. *No* echoes with the screams. *No* fills him up with tar. Like he's cracking inside, splitting open, becoming someone else.

He sees the stag in the darkness inside his mind and blinks.

Hannibal. Just Hannibal.

Hannibal's right. It's within Will's power to do something like this. Kill with this grandiosity. He's known it for a long time. Tried very hard to forget it.

And now that he's lost time, it's within the realm of possibility.

Will's pulse pounds louder in his head. He pats his jacket for aspirin. Familiar plastic bottle. With shaking hands he pries open the bottle and downs two. Chemical taste of safety.

"I don't want you to drive for a while."

Will looks up. How long has Hannibal been standing there?

"Not until you feel more like yourself."

Hannibal's putting on his overcoat.

"I was just going home."

Will hears the invitation. Screams fill him up with fear. He could do what he saw today. He could make that totem. Could do it to anyone. Even Hannibal.

Hannibal knows this. Understands. Invites Will home nonetheless.

But something makes Will shake his head. Some pride, some fear. He's not Hannibal's charity case. He gets to his feet.

"I'm okay," he says. Doesn't convince even himself.

Hannibal, stern but caring, says, "I must insist, Will. Just until you feel more like yourself."

Will breathes, blinks, considers. Hannibal is safety. Hannibal knows his fear. Knows his capabilities. Invites him home anyway. Will nods tiredly, closing his eyes and exhaling. He falls in step behind Hannibal without a thought.

Daylight hurts his eyes. He looks down and bodies unfurl beneath his feet, one for each tile on the walkway between the patient exit and the parking lot.

One of them is his. Contorted like a gnarled tree. Bleeding out in the snow. Will stutter-steps over his own pale corpse. Fear pulses next to madness in his ears.

When he slides into the passenger's seat, the familiar smell of Hannibal's car registers vaguely. His eyes fix on a distant point. Buildings melt past the window and warp into

screams. They flange in one ear and out the other, bouncing between the channels of his mind. Dizzying. A merry-go-round of bodies. So many bodies. So many screams.

Behind his eyes they wait with yet more clarity. They ghost against his skin and wail.

Will unbuckles his seatbelt mechanically and steps out of the car, pulse pounding in his ears again, screams timed with it.

So many bodies.

He takes a few steps toward the house, stumbles, and falls into the snow. He coughs and chokes, heaves bodily and gags. Screams like blood from the night nurse's eyes pour out of him. For a terrifying moment, Will sees her under him again. Blood runs out. Then snow returns and he retches up a yellow spat of bile. Wind carries a string of spit from his mouth to the ground. A disembodied hand wearing his glove dumps a fistful of clean snow over the mess.

The screams fade. Still there but not so loud.

Will feels himself being lifted to his feet. Reaches up and over Hannibal's shoulder and stumbles along, trying to keep up, until Hannibal stops. Hears the key scratching in the lock. Click. Blast of warmth, smell of safety.

He tugs at the gloves on his hands as he stumbles inside. One hand free. Glove in pocket. Neatly. Orderly. Another hand free. Glove in pocket. Safe.

What next?

Before he can think of it, hands are unzipping his coat. He looks up. Hannibal concentrating on the task. Then looking into his face. Matter-of-factly. Unfazed. Dr. Lecter.

"Take off your shoes. Sit in the kitchen."

And he disappears up the stairs.

Will shivers slightly at his departure. He tries to zip up his coat again but can't match one side with the other. He gives up and bends down to untie his boots. The ground tries to come up at him. He catches himself, breathes, and tries to hold steady but the ground won't stay still.

Everything ripples.

Will closes his eyes and breathes and feels for the laces, completing the task without sight.

The dizziness is worse when he stands. Using the wall, he scrapes his way to the kitchen and collapses into the chair. Nearly dark in the kitchen.

Will closes his eyes only to see the totem rise up from the beach again.

My legacy. My life.

Screams claw at him. He would tear his own ears off to make them stop. Anything to make them stop.

He feels his hands press against his head as he leans over. He's never lost control like this before. Never for so long.

Never lost time.

Without knowing what he's doing, Will draws his legs up in the chair and rocks gently back and forth.

Screams everywhere. Bodies everywhere. The only fact of life.

He knows time passes because he hears the beats of his heart and feels his stomach twist and his chest tighten. His thoughts babble nonsensically.

Will flinches when the light comes on. Stabbing. Pounding. He closes his eyes and keeps rocking. Bodies pour out of the ground before him. He doesn't dig them. They erupt, hack themselves to pieces, and begin their gross assemblage.

Will starts, fear spiking, burning adrenaline. Surely he's going to run out of it soon.

He hears himself inhale sharply.

This has to end. It can't last indefinitely.

As his eyes adjust to the light, he sees Hannibal making tea in those weird tea pots. Like he did the night of Will's first day back. The nurse he saw outside. Her gouged eyes. She flashes in front of him, impaled, composed, wretched.

Will sighs. It's going to be bad tonight.

No wonder Alana ran from him.

That thought stabs deep in his gut. Everything spins. He can't breathe.

Will uncurls, dropping his feet to the floor, and sits forward until he's doubled over. It's a terrible decision. The dizziness gets worse. The urge to vomit or pass out overwhelms him.

He feels Hannibal nudge his legs apart and press his head between his knees. His arms fall to the floor. He rests shaking palms on its stable surface.

"It's been several hours since you ate or drank anything. Tap once if yes."

Will taps a finger on the floor. The rushing sensation of falling into thin air worsens. He feels Hannibal lightly touch his back in a way that's meant to be comforting.

"You're okay. It's hypoglycemia. Low blood sugar. Stay like that until you feel better."

Will's blood whooshes sickeningly in his ears and the screams sound like boiling water and the scraping of a spoon across metal and he can't tell if he's going to fall and crunch into the ground or just hang weightless and sick in the air.

All he can control is his breathing.

Inhale.

Kissing Alana. Cry of the dog hit by the car. Hannibal's body bruised and broken. Screams from the totem.

Exhale.

Stabbing the last one. Beach under his feet, lake scent in the air. Cold. Frozen.

Inhale.

The stag standing across the stream melting as tar into honeysuckle. Tar bursting within him as someone else rises.

Exhale.

No, no, none of this. None of this. None of it.

Inhale.

Nothingness. Blankness. Nothingness.

Exhale.

Sounds of water boiling and Hannibal's soft movements.

Inhale.

Smell of safety. Smell of home.

Exhale.

Better.

Will pushes off with his left hand and draws it up to his knee. Right hand still on the floor. Firm. Stable.

Warm. Safe. Calm.

Right hand now. Push. Up and against his thigh. His hands spread out to cup his head, still spinning.

Breathe.

Patience.

He pushes up a little, raising his arms, cradling his head.

Too much.

Breathe.

Calm. Still.

Patience.

Then up a little more. He lets his arms fall between his knees, his head drooping.

Eventually, he feels relief like he's come to the end of a carnival ride.

Hannibal offers him half a glass of juice. Will takes it with a shaking hand. Sips from the straw. Something heavily berry.

“Slowly,” Hannibal advises.

Will listens to him add tea to the pots. He glances up. Tea that isn’t in a bag. Strange. He doesn’t remember that from last time. But he doesn’t remember much more than the funny tea pots.

“What’s with the tea pots?”

He hears the words drag out of his mouth and has no idea why he said them.

Hannibal studies him. Will sips the juice, accustomed to that appraising gaze.

“Tetsubin,” Hannibal answers. “Japanese cast iron tea pot with a history dating to the 17th century. A mesh strainer allows for the use of loose leaf tea. Pour hot water over it” – Will watches as Hannibal does – “and it’s nearly ready.”

Will breathes and sips and watches. He notices a figure on the tiny top as Hannibal puts each one in place.

Will gestures vaguely. “I like the bird on the top.” He swallows and thinks of the bird’s name. “Heron.” Blue and grey and white. Flashes of bayou and marsh and fishing and morning sun. “Beautiful bird.”

Hannibal smiles faintly. “You’re thinking of the blue heron. An abundant water bird.”

Will risks a tiny nod. “Seen them fly? Blue wings. Beautiful.”

He sips juice again and memories come to him of the birds soaring low across bayous, their great blue and grey wings yellowed in the morning sun. He feels the sun on his face. The smell of the bayou.

“I have.”

Hannibal's voice calls him back. He brings a touch of sunshine with him.

"Fine birds," Hannibal adds.

Will nods. More juice. More birds. Birds are safe.

"Egrets, too," Will says, remembering them hunting in the cattails. "Snowy white. Watch them spear fish."

"Prodigious hunters."

Will smiles as the scene fills out. Himself and Hannibal in a canoe with a small motor, early morning sunshine, out for pan fish, watching the water birds hunt in the cattails, among the cypress knees, through a top water layer of duckweed. No one else but them. Clean air. Smell of the water. Warm sunshine.

Will opens his eyes. No more screams. No more dizziness.

He feels free. Free but exhausted. His head pounds with his pulse. Everything is raw.

Hannibal smiles at him. "Looking better."

Will takes a longer drink of the juice and nods cautiously.

Hannibal brings the tea pots over to the butcher's block. He pours tea into one of those small iron cups and passes it to Will.

"Ginger and lemon," Hannibal says. "Good for the stomach."

Will sips. Hot. Not too bad.

Hannibal sips his tea, too. Will hears the quiet intake of liquid. Here's Hannibal. Alive and near and safe. So much more than he seems under that suit.

Will takes a longer drink. Settled. Calm. Okay.

"What happened to me just now?" Will mumbles.

"You'd know better than I, Will," Hannibal says.

Will says nothing.

"You paled, seemed dizzy, and doubled over. You were hyperventilating for a while but you corrected it. Did you feel panicked?"

Will drains the small cup and sifts through his sensory memories. Hannibal refills his cup.

"No," Will breathes after a while.

It wasn't a panic attack. It was whatever an attack of someone else's violence is called.

“Then perhaps it was low blood sugar,” Hannibal says as though that’s the answer. But Will has a nagging sense that it isn’t.

“When did you last eat?”

Will thinks. He remembers driving to Grafton himself to meet Jack. He ate a small breakfast before he left. Hadn't felt well.

“Breakfast,” he hears himself say. His voice sounds disembodied. He’s aware that he’s staring into space in Hannibal’s kitchen, that Hannibal is probably watching him, but he can’t stop himself from staring. He can’t snap out of it.

Because of the lost time. It was like no time passed at all. Like he woke from a dream. Is it a form of sleepwalking? Sleepdriving? Aware and awake but not as Will Graham?

It’s dissociative amnesia at least. Dissociative identity disorder at worst. Caused by stress and trauma. Self-abuse, Hannibal said.

But he simply can’t know the need Will has to feel validated by saving a life. He craves the feeling. It makes all the stress, the nightmares, the headaches, and the instability worth it.

And yet it’s obviously a huge problem. Alana saw it and ran. And now he’s lost time. Dissociative amnesia. Jesus.

Hannibal startles him when he takes Will’s cup and refills it. He hadn’t noticed he’d been drinking.

“What were you thinking about?”

Will accepts the tea and sips, the tiny cup in his hands making him feel like a small giant.

“I was thinking about what happened,” Will answers. “The lost time.” He stares into space. “I don’t remember anything. Nothing.”

Can’t look at Hannibal.

“Dissociative amnesia,” Hannibal says.

Will nods. He looks down at the tea swirling in the cup. Steam wafts off its surface. He holds it close to his face. Feels it tickle his nose. Drinks. Warmth.

“But I can’t stop the work. I need it.”

“You can have a full life without it. A meaningful life.”

Will looks up sharply. He didn’t mind Hannibal knowing that, but hoped Hannibal would never say it.

He holds the little cup near his nose again, feeling the warmth, smelling the ginger and lemon. He feels hollow inside. He’s putting warm liquid in himself to fill up with something.

Something that isn't screams and bodies and tar and Hannibal's deeply-felt concern.

"Other than quitting, what can I do?"

Hannibal shrugs. "Little things."

Will sips the tea again. He glances up at Hannibal, asking him to elaborate. Anything is better than being stuck inside his head.

"Meditation. What you did earlier with the heron and the egret was good. Do that before you go to sleep."

Hannibal sips his own tea and pours himself and Will fresh cups, finishing off the pots.

"Don't drink coffee after noon."

Will sniffs: not happening. Only several strong cups of coffee each day keep him going. He needs one, sometimes two before he leaves Quantico just to be sure he'll make it home awake.

"Drink more water," Hannibal offers. "Eat at meal times."

"Okay, okay," Will says, rubbing his forehead. Damn aspirin isn't working.

"I know. I don't always take care of myself."

"Why not?"

"I forget. I don't think about it. Hours go so fast sometimes."

"Mindfulness," Hannibal says. "Be mindful of who you are, where you are, and when you are. You'll miss fewer meals that way."

Will sighs, feeling put upon. "I know, I know."

"You've heard this all before."

"Hah. Many times."

"Must be sound advice."

"Doesn't work. Never has."

"Ever keep up with it?"

Will rolls his eyes. "It's how I'm wired. You know."

Hannibal's mouth quirks, then he looks away.

"You're making it hard for me to help you, Will."

Will looks at him. Emotions swirl in his eyes.

I'm worried about you, Will.

Damn.

He's doing this to Hannibal.

After Hannibal was attacked in his office and had to kill a man because Will failed him. And now he's doing this to Hannibal.

Slowly, carefully, Will gets to his feet. He takes a few steps to reach Hannibal and places a hand on his shoulder.

"You are helping me."

His insides squirm. The moment feels right, but he's not comfortable with it. He takes a breath and tries to beat down the quiver of fear.

Hannibal's eyes soften. That helps.

Will feels warmer inside again. Not the cold, dark place where violence lives.

Will takes a tentative step away from Hannibal, having some notion of getting himself to bed. He sways. Hannibal doesn't wait for him to fall. Just catches him and leans him against the butcher's block.

"You need to lie down," Hannibal says, appraising him critically again. "How have you been sleeping?"

A sigh catches in Will's throat. The dizziness is back. He could curl up on the floor and be entirely content.

"Worse."

"I can give you a mild sedative to – "

"No," Will barks. "I'll be fine." He hears his overzealous tone echo back to him. "I'm sorry, I didn't meant to – "

"It's fine," Hannibal says. "No drugs."

Will nods, the corner of his mouth pulling appreciatively.

Hannibal glances toward the back. "Think you can make it?"

Will pushes himself up. "Find out."

No.

Hannibal quickly dips under his arm before he can fall.

Never been this exhausted just from looking. Something's wrong.

As Hannibal helps him to the bed, memories of being shot drift to him. Of Hannibal having to help him do nearly everything. Couldn't take a piss for a while without Hannibal helping him. But Hannibal never once complained. Hannibal's a good friend.

Will feels warm inside again. Hannibal lifts his sweater and encourages him to raise his arms. He manages with great effort. Hannibal's fingers on the buttons of his shirt.

Will swats at Hannibal's hands. "Not that far gone."

He takes over the task, his fingers moving much more slowly. Hannibal smiles when Will looks up at him. When he looks up again, Hannibal is gone. He concentrates on removing his shirt, then fumbles with his belt. He's sliding his pants off when Hannibal returns with a glass of water.

Will sighs and chokes down half the water. It's the best he can do. The tea settled his stomach; the sensation of fullness unsettles it.

Will draws his legs up against his chest and sits on the bed and waits. He closes his eyes and thinks of hard, flat dirt. Dirt baked in the sun. Flat as the very idea of flat. Cotton land. Blossoming everywhere like fine southern snow.

The rows undulate in his mind. He swallows thickly.

The burst of a blister pack next to him. Familiar sound. Hannibal's hand finding his, placing something there.

"Antacid," Hannibal says. "Chewable."

"Not ginger?" Will mutters.

"You probably have this in your medicine cabinet at home."

Will lifts the disk to his mouth and sucks on it. Strawberry. Not bad. It crumbles quickly in his mouth and he swallows it, hoping it works fast.

He hears Hannibal set a trash can down by the bed. Acknowledging the inevitable.

No, not the inevitable, Will thinks as he swallows again. Not over feeling a little full. He's not this sick.

He's relieved when Hannibal leaves. No audience for this.

It's weird. He doesn't normally get sick over cases, but today, and a week ago with Budge. Stress can get to the stomach.

Or maybe he's got a virus. He didn't feel well this morning. Not nauseous so much as beaten down. More than just tired. Fatigued.

Will clenches his fists and thinks of herons flying. The placid surface of a bayou. Still, smooth things like glass and frozen lakes.

The fur of his dogs between his fingertips. Warm bodies sleeping next to him, keeping some of the nightmares away. Their good smell. Their easy love.

He feels his heart slow. He shivers slightly from the cold sweat on his skin. He doesn't feel imminently sick any longer. Can take a deeper breath. He doesn't move, though. Give it a little longer.

This. The dizzy spell earlier. Dizzy spell – a phrase someone's grandma would use. Not a phrase that applies to a man in the prime of his life. Something's bad wrong.

Voodoo, they'd call it in New Orleans. Will imagines someone with a little doll of him sticking pins in his head and stomach, surrounded by the blood and feathers of a recently-sacrificed chicken. It's such a comical image that he feels like laughing.

He can breathe again. Much better.

He turns off the lamp and lies down on his side. What was it Hannibal said to do? Think about birds?

It can't hurt. He searches his memory for a fine spring morning when he was by himself and free to catch fish, frogs, toads, turtles, and whatever else he wanted, as long as he was careful about snakes and alligators. He always was. Saw too many not to be. On that morning, he watched a heron hunt for half an hour; he stayed low in the boat so the bird wouldn't see him. He goes back to that moment and watches the bird and quickly drifts away.

Next thing he knows, he's on the beach again lashing corpses to rebar and wood. The last victim struggles nearby. He's overpowered by hatred and contempt for each of these miserable cretins. Even if they are his legacy, he's done with this part of his life. He takes little joy in building the totem.

No, the joy is in stabbing the squirming man once perfectly in the heart.

Stabbed in the heart.

His heart lurches when the man morphs into Hannibal, bloody and bruised, not seeing Tobias Budge come up behind him with a steel string garrote. Will tries to warn him but either he can't speak or Hannibal can't hear him. He watches Budge wrap the strings around Hannibal's face and pull, biting into his flesh. Budge kicks him down in the sink and holds him there while he thrashes.

But it's not Hannibal who's thrashing. It's Will. Thrashing and boiling in Mississippi River. He can see the stag turned to tar on the bank. It cracks, light coming from inside it, and bursts into honeysuckle.

Will watches, stunned, forgetting his own peril.

What was that?

He starts awake, clutching the pillow, muscles clenched, soaked in all the usual places. He sits up and wonders for a moment where he is before the previous hours come back to him.

Shit.

Will stands and pulls his shirt off, heading for the bathroom where he can dry off, wash his face, and collect himself. He sees the light on in the kitchen. Hannibal's up, too.

Will checks his watch, an item he forgot to remove before bed. Nearly 1 a.m. He cleans his body and splashes cool water on his hot cheeks.

Maybe a fever?

Great. Perfect timing.

Will dabs his face so it won't drip but doesn't dry it. He wants the cool to linger.

Back in his room, he finds a fresh set of underclothes and swaps them, then pads tiredly into the kitchen.

Hannibal sits in the chair with a glass of wine at his side. He's dressed in his pajamas and robe, and his tired eyes say he hasn't slept at all.

"Late night?" Will asks as he crosses to the refrigerator.

"Not so eager to sleep," Hannibal says, fingering the stem of the wine glass.

Will nods sympathetically as he helps himself to a glass of water. If nothing else, at least his stomach feels fine. If only he could say the same for his head.

He rubs his eyes and goes back his room to dig out the bottle of aspirin. Hannibal watches when he returns to the kitchen and takes them with water.

"There's some bread," Hannibal says, nodding toward a cabinet.

"I'm fine."

"For the aspirin," Hannibal clarifies. "You keep taking it on an empty stomach, you'll get an ulcer."

"I know," Will says gruffly.

Hannibal just shakes his head and pushes himself to his feet. He crosses the room to the bread, tears off two pieces, and gives one to Will. Hannibal leans against the kitchen island to eat his.

Will rolls his eyes but bites into the bread anyway.

"There's soup in the refrigerator, too."

“Maybe later,” Will says.

He glances up and down at Hannibal.

“Could try one of your sedatives,” Will suggests before biting into the bread again. He didn’t think he was hungry but maybe he is. Just a bit.

Hannibal’s lip quirks. “I don’t like them either.”

“Muscle relaxant worked well, though.”

“Mmm.”

Will nods to Hannibal’s arm. “How’s…?”

Hannibal shrugs and lifts his sleeve to show Will the still-healing wound. More pink than red now.

Will’s face twists sympathetically. Though he knows it probably doesn’t hurt Hannibal much anymore, he can't not do it. Hannibal smiles and Will breathes a little easier. He swallows the last bit of bread with the last drink of water and feels okay. Better. Seeing Hannibal up with the same problem helps, too.

I appreciate the company.

Will smiles slightly.

That wasn't the best circumstance to hear that phrase, but Will feels like some good came out of it. They got closer to each other. As much as that terrifies him, it also makes him feel cared for. Like Hannibal will do a lot to avoid hurting him. So much more than anyone else.

He remembers thinking about safety earlier. The word flashed in his mind repeatedly when he’d entered the kitchen where they’ve spent so many hours.

Something’s wrong with him. Physically. Maybe mentally, too. It’s possible. Yet Hannibal accepts him just as he's always done. Challenges him, too. Doesn’t treat him like he’s fragile.

I’m your friend, Will. I care about your life.

He feels warm inside as his eyelids start to droop. He didn’t sleep well. His body craves rest.

Hannibal seems to read his mind. “You need to sleep,” he says.

Will nods.

“So do I.”

Will glances up at him through half-shut eyes, guessing at his meaning. His chest tightens with panic for one terrible moment. Then he thinks that it wouldn’t be all that different than

having the dogs in the bed. They don't have to be even that close for the sense of shared security to help. As long as the warm body sleeps, it's safe to sleep.

Will turns to get towels for the bed when Hannibal catches his attention and gestures toward the stairs. Hannibal's bed? Okay. Kind of weird, but can't be that bad. For one, it'll smell like him.

The idea relaxes Will. He follows Hannibal and lingers for a moment at the doorway until Hannibal turns on a lamp. In the soft light, the grey and blue don't seems so oppressive. Just masculine. Just Hannibal.

Weird. Different. But not threatening.

Will cautiously steps inside the room.

Hannibal smiles at him as he removes his robe. Full pajamas. Nothing sexual. Just sharing a bed. That's all.

He takes a breath and steps closer, waiting for Hannibal to make the first move.

Hannibal slides into bed on what Will presumes is his preferred side. Will likes to sleep in the middle of the bed. But Hannibal has a king sized bed. Space is not a problem.

Will approaches the other side. He knows his face tells Hannibal how weird this is for him. How strange. How unfamiliar. He braces for a question about whether he's ever shared a bed with someone without having sex with them first.

Hannibal takes up a book instead.

Will slips quietly between the sheets -sheets softer than he thought sheets could be. He slides over until he has two inches of space on his side and lies down on his back.

"Will the light bother you?" Hannibal asks.

Will, eyes already closed, shakes his head.

He lies awake and listens to Hannibal read. Listens to the quiet. The occasional rustle of the turned page. He bathes in the scent of Hannibal. It triggers such a sense of calm. Yet he still feels like the poor kid invited across the tracks to the rich kid's party. It's hard to relax.

At length, he hears Hannibal put the book down, turn off the light, and arrange himself within arm's reach.

"May I rest my hand on your chest, Will?"

Hannibal knows he wasn't asleep. As he should. Will wasn't exactly hiding it.

Will hums *yes* without thinking. It can't be different from a dog. Not that different. It's just Hannibal.

He hears Hannibal's hand come close, slip over his arm and onto his chest. It reminds Will of a gesture he's seen children make. It's chaste in that way. Loving as friends love.

He lies still and feels Hannibal's arm grow heavy on his chest. Sleeping.

Finally, Will feels himself relax. Sleep becomes a possibility.

A while longer and it's a certainty, and he's dragged down by the weight of warmth above his heart.

Étouffée

Chapter Summary

Alana talks to Will. Will accounts for the important things in his life. Hannibal and Will visit Abigail at Port Haven. Hannibal accounts for Will.

Trou Normand 2 / 3.

Chapter Notes

In addition to being a Cajun and creole dish from southern Louisiana, *étouffée* means "smothered" or "suffocated" (from the verb *étouffer*). [x]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today, Will can almost bear to look at their faces.

He selects candids and police report photos from a database and inserts them into the slide show for class. Thumbnail to life-sized. No less dead.

It's a little easier this time because he saw their decomposed bodies only. He didn't have to see them fresh on the scene or later on the table when the stink of death still clung to them.

The names get him, though. Names he'll never forget. In a practical sense, it makes his lecture more dramatic. He doesn't have to use any notes. His students will see these people as people rather than victims. They must never forget the inviolable sovereignty of each person.

He sits back unapproachably as the cadets file in and runs through the slideshow one last time before dimming the lights and brightening the screen on a blank slide.

Will holds back a sigh. Even this isn't easy any more. Not when he's teaching cases he works on.

Sure, it's nice to have an audience for his work. He prepares more thoroughly when he knows he must explain his ideas to trainees. It's very much like talking to Hannibal: it helps him clarify his thinking.

An image of Hannibal in his pajamas making breakfast this morning flashes in front of Will. Hannibal in whose bed he'd slept in last night. He'd been alone when he woke. Hannibal knew it would be easier that way.

Will sits up straighter and checks the time. Two minutes. Enough time for him to calm down. Waking up alone had been easier in all ways but one and he hadn't done anything about it before he left for Quantico. He's been too busy today to think about it before now. Now is a really strange time to think about it.

Will wonders idly why his thoughts have strayed so far, cues up the slideshow, dims the lights, and begins his lecture.

He walks them through the details of the crime scene. He covers the totem pole in the context of its cultural resonances and the specific message of this killer's design. He explains how to extrapolate from the evidence by drawing on both forensics and culture.

He's nearly done with the lecture, working up to his theory that the timeline will reveal everything they need to know about this totem, when Alana appears.

"Will?"

Stepping into the lecture hall before class is over because…?

"I don't want to interrupt if you're rehearsing."

Rehearsing?

Will glances up. No students.

They were just there. They were…

Fear knocks the breath out of him.

Again. Here. In front of Alana. Who's so perfect in that dress. And who doesn't seem to know he wasn't rehearsing.

Will's stomach flutters. He hasn't talked to her since she saw his madness and ran from him.

He recovers quickly. "No, no, no, it's okay, it's okay," he says even as fear makes him shrink inside.

"Very moody in here," she says as she steps forward.

Will hears her tone, just on this side of sensual. His mouth goes dry.

"Ah…," he starts, "well, that's me all over."

Terrible. Stupidest thing he's ever said. He smiles to cover.

"Come on in," he urges, removing his glasses to try to wipe away the sudden headache that often accompanies one of these – goddamn hallucinations.

Noticing her caution, he adds, "I promise I won't try to kiss you again." He hopes it sounds inviting and appropriately self-deprecatory.

She does come forward. Smiling at him. So beautiful. Radiant. No one's ever seemed radiant to him before, but there it is.

He sees from her bearing that she came to talk about them.

“Unless you’ve stopped taking your own advice,” Will says, giving voice to his greatest desire.

“A doctor who treats herself has a fool for a patient,” Alana says.

Contritely. She’s apologizing. He thinks. Not completely sure. But that sounded like an admission of…foolishness?

Which means…?

She’s still standing far away.

What is this?

Will’s chest tightens as hope glimmers and glows. He tries to quash it.

“I regretted leaving your house the other night,” she says.

Hope flares as Will’s mind fires a thousand thoughts at once. His heart pounds, chest hurts. The wound is as raw as if it'd happened last night.

“Regretted…” Will turns the word choice over in his head, setting the clicker aside. “Implying that you’re no longer regretting? Or are you still in a state of regret?”

“I’m crisscrossing the state line.”

Alana looks genuinely conflicted. If there’s a possibility, even a faint one, he has to…

“What side of the line are you on now?” he challenges.

And she comes forward. And she’s getting into his space. He can smell her perfume. The same perfume. God.

“I’ve got one foot firmly planted on both sides.”

What? He’s going to burst. Her face, her body, her smell, the fact of her stepping forward, of coming to see him when he’s alone in a room in the first place – it’s too much.

He can’t help himself. He’s blunt.

“You tellin’ me that to confuse me?”

“No, I’m telling you that to be honest about how I feel. I don’t want to mislead you but I don’t want to lie to you either.”

Will sees absolute sincerity. He nods in agreement. “I won’t lie if you don’t,” he promises.

“I have feelings for you, Will.”

Hope blossoms, vanquishing fear. He’s suddenly weightless again. He has no desire to search for the ground.

“But I can’t just have an affair with you,” she says, and he sees how badly she doesn’t want to say those words. How much she does want to be with him.

“It would be…reckless.”

If she has feelings… and they’re so strong she has a hard time saying she can’t do this with him… if… just –

He laughs again, thinking of her previous excuse.

“Why? Why?” Will asks plaintively. “And it is not because you have a professional curiosity about me.”

“No,” she says straightforwardly. “It’s because I think you’re unstable.”

Will’s nervous smile dies. The ground slams into him like a 2x4. He swallows around the lump of aborted hope in his throat.

“And until that changes I can only be your friend.”

Will nods and tries to feel numb, tries to kill the ball of terrible cloying emotion that makes his eyes water and his head throb.

“Thank you for not lying,” he says, using every ounce of his strength to keep his face impassive.

He waits for her to go away. He needs her to go away. Needs to be alone.

But she keeps looking.

“Do you feel unstable?”

He makes a noise in his throat where the lump is, *yes*, and nods vigorously, breathing through the impending tears, smiling to make them go away. But already she’s approaching him and her arms are out and she embraces him and *oh god so soft and warm and good and here*.

It’s the worst thing that could happen and then, quickly, the best thing. He closes his eyes and breathes in the scent of her hair and just absorbs. He needs all of this to sustain him.

When she pulls away – too soon, but ever would be too soon – he fights to keep the tears inside until she leaves. He won’t cry in front of her. He won’t.

She breaks away and steps back three feet. Double the normal distance of personal space, some disconnected part of his mind notes.

“Hannibal knows?” she asks.

Will nods, not trusting himself to speak.

“He’s helping you?”

Nods again.

“You’re making progress?”

Not sure of the answer, Will quirks a lip. He glances up at her and sees her take that as a yes.

“Good,” she says.

And with a sad smile that contains everything he feels, Alana turns reluctantly and walks toward the door.

Will sits on the desk and kicks his legs like he’s eight and holds the edge tightly as he watches her walk away. Perfect. Leaving. He listens to her footsteps fade down the hall, thinks about the sight of her walking away, and wonders when, if ever, she might walk toward him with no reservations.

It’s a question he's afraid to answer.

Will counts to thirty before the ball of emotion wells up and chokes him. He slides off the desk and retreats to a high corner of the room where he can see everything. Sliding down against the wall, Will covers his face with his hands and quietly lets go.

Unstable. He feels so unstable he hardly remembers what stability is. Apart from the moments he has with Hannibal and the moments when he’s at home and can see the lights in the distance and feel anchored, nothing is certain.

Nothing is certain. Not anymore. Not after yesterday.

Lost time.

Hallucinations.

Another one. Another goddamn hallucination. Right in front of her.

So fucked up. So wrong. So broken.

You’re not broken.

She can’t think that now. Can’t possibly delude herself into thinking that anymore.

No. She came to see him because she had to face reality.

He laughs through the tears rolling unchecked down his face: at least one of them isn’t deluded. At least she’s smart enough to protect herself.

His mind skips to Hannibal. God. Hannibal getting so close to him. So close last night.

He'd woken up to the smell of coffee and pancakes. Too comfortable to get up right away, he'd buried his face in Hannibal's pillow and inhaled and memorized. He'd been tempted to lie there until Hannibal came to get him. Maybe entice Hannibal into something. He'd slept so well – deeply, no dreams – he would have been able to thank Hannibal for all he did yesterday. For opening his bed. For the hand over his heart.

Will can't remember the last time he slept comfortably in the same bed with another person.

A little calmer, he searches his memory as he wipes his tear-stained face. Never with Dad. Never with a sexual partner. If someone stayed the night, he usually didn't sleep at all.

So, never.

Never.

Now that he knows how good it feels to be that comfortable with someone else...how special such a connection is...and now Alana says she has feelings for him but can't be with him because his mind's not right, because he's hallucinating...

Frustration, anger, and deep sorrow crest and break across his face. He feels cheated. Just when he learns how to be with someone else, just when he knows he can be a good partner for someone - something he never thought possible - just when things seem to be coming together, his detestable mind slips further into madness. Delusion and hallucination and lost time and god only knows what else.

Head pounding, Will sits forward, pulls his knees up, and parts them so he can rest his head on his folded arms. Tears drip off of his face and onto the carpet. His chest hurts.

This needs to happen. He knows it. He hates it so much, hates the weakness of it, but he needs the emotional release. So he fuels it. All the fear he has about his mind. Tumor. Blood clot. Seizures.

He laughs again through the tears. At this point, a tumor would be good news.

No. If this is going to happen, let it happen. He whispers in his mind what he fears the most.

I fear not knowing who I am.

There. It's said. His most fundamental terror given voice.

All he's ever had is the assurance of identity. The assurance that he would always come back to who he is. No matter how hard he pushed himself, no matter how hard anyone else pushed him, he'd always find his way back.

Not anymore.

Nothing is certain now.

A long time passes before the sense that everything is wrong in his life lets up enough for him to take a normal breath.

He knows that isn't really true as he wipes his face again. He's got Hannibal. The dogs. Himself. He's strong. A fighter. Always has been.

Even if all of that's in flux now.

Hannibal. He's going to have to do what Alana did and pull back. To protect Hannibal. Hannibal who seems to think that he can handle whatever Will throws at him. Who doesn't seem to realize how dangerous Will is. Or if he does, who doesn't care.

But he should. He's not immune to harm.

Hannibal's face flashes in front of him: bloodied, tears in his eyes, shocked from the fight and what he had to do to defend himself.

I thought you were dead.

Jesus. He can't allow himself to hurt Hannibal. And he knows so many ways he could.

Because – he sniffs at the thought, feeling a last gasp of sadness push up and out of his raw throat – because Alana's right: he shouldn't be with anyone until he's stable. And he's so unstable he hardly knows what he'll do next. Something's wrong with him and it's causing these problems and it can't just be stress. That leaves only two options, one significantly better than the other.

A final tear runs down his face as he checks his watch. Class in half an hour. Then he's driving to Baltimore to visit Abigail with Hannibal.

Abigail is the other bright spot in his life, though he doesn't visit her as often as he'd like. He's not always sure how to be around her. But she means a great deal to him. And now Freddie Lounds wants to expose her to the drooling livers who read trashy bestsellers.

Breakfast this morning flashes in front of him. Hannibal in his pajamas drinking coffee, waiting on Will to get out of the shower.

"Abigail called," Hannibal said after they'd both had enough coffee to be civil. "She wants to write a book with Freddie Lounds about what happened to her."

He'd almost choked on Hannibal's fancy French version of pancakes.

"She wants… what?" he'd said when he could speak, "to tell people what happened? As if they'll believe it? As if Freddie Lounds won't warp her words?"

Hannibal sipped his coffee. "This is exactly the problem."

Though his tone was calm, Will saw his concern. A mirror of what he felt churning inside. No one but the two of them to look out for Abigail. No one else knows what happened. She can't feed the gluttonous masses and expect to be exonerated.

“We have to see her.”

Hannibal agreed. Said he’d arrange for them to visit her after Will’s afternoon class.

Will doesn’t know what he’s going to say. He wants to treat Abigail like she’s an adult, but she’s not. She’s still a teenager. Still developing. And doing that while recovering from something Will himself hasn’t gotten over yet.

Hobbs flashes in front of him, lashed to the totem pole like Christ.

Will starts. Blinks in the dim lecture hall.

He checks his watch. Twenty-three minutes until class. No lost time. Just a hallucination.

He wonders just how fucked up it is that he feels relieved by that thought. *Just a hallucination.* Shit.

It occurs vaguely to him as he gets to his feet that he should be writing this stuff down. He’ll have to start doing that, he thinks, walking down the stairs and out of the room.

Alone in the men’s room, he rolls up a sleeve and holds the drain plug down until the sink fills enough for him to dip his face in the cold water. It chills the heat out of his eyes and nose and cheeks. Immensely soothing. For all that crying felt terrible, he’s calm now in a way he hasn’t been since he set foot on that beach.

Will dries his face and takes a deep breath. He looks splotchy in the mirror. Flushed in some places, pale in others. He doesn’t worry about it. Lights off for today’s lecture. And anyway, he doesn’t give a damn if they do notice.

As he leaves the bathroom to finish preparing for class, Will steels himself and turns his mind back to what’s familiar, to what he knows best: murder.

Hannibal sees that something’s happened today to Will, something significant, when Will meets him at Port Haven’s visitor check in.

“Rough day?” Hannibal asks in a quiet tone so the receptionist won’t hear him.

“Talk about it later,” Will mumbles.

Hannibal smells the salt of many tears on him as they affix their visitors badges. Will, shoulders tense, leads them down the hall. Intriguing.

Abigail brightens when she sees them. She looks happier to see Hannibal than she does to see Will. Will won’t notice. He’s too angry.

Anger is what Will does best. His father was often angry with him. He doesn’t want to replicate his father’s behavior, of course not, but sometimes he has little choice. Since Will is angry at Freddie Lounds and not Abigail, Hannibal steps aside and lets him play his role.

“I’m trying to be understated when I say that this is a bad idea.”

He is. Hannibal hears him just barely containing himself.

“Freddie Lounds is dangerous,” Hannibal adds.

“She says she wants me to write about you guys in the book,” Abigail says brightly. Innocently. Falsely so and detectable to anyone who knows her. But only two people know her.

It must remain that way.

“You would be forfeiting your privacy, and ours,” Hannibal points out calmly.

He sees her take that point. Will marshals his arguments in Hannibal’s peripheral vision.

“This – this – all of this will change,” Will says adamantly. “Whatever you’re feeling now, that won’t last. Things change.”

Hannibal hears his voice catch in his throat.

“Things are changing for me, too.” Will steps forward, moving toward her, utterly sincere.

Hannibal watches, fascinated. Whatever happened to him today has made him reflect, something he does not often do.

“I’ve been doing some accounting of what’s important in my life and what isn’t. You are important, Abigail.”

“Just because you killed my dad doesn’t mean you get to be him.”

There it is: the cruelty of the young, the cruelty of the wounded. Will shuts down.

“Abigail,” Hannibal begins, a slight reprimand in his tone. “You’ve been through a traumatic event.”

He steps closer until he’s standing just behind Will. They must present a united front.

“No one more traumatized than you, Abigail, but we went through it together. What you write, you write about all of us.”

“I don’t need your permission,” Abigail says, standing, too, knowing that she needs to be on equal footing. But she is so young. And because of Freddie Lounds, somewhat misguided.

“You don’t need our approval,” Hannibal points out, “but I hope it would mean something.”

Because it’s honest, it gets her. Anger, confusion, fear. Much stronger from her now than from Will, who’s so hurt by Abigail’s comment that he broadcasts little else.

“I know what people think I did,” she says. “They’re wrong.”

Still denying it, even to herself. Sweet Abigail. One day, she will acknowledge the truth.

“Why can’t I tell everybody that they’re wrong?”

Will stirs next to Hannibal, brought out of his pain by Abigail’s expression of hers.

Will, adamant again, protective, sincere, says, “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Yet,” Hannibal adds, stepping closer to her. “But if you open this door, Abigail, you won’t control what comes through. Are you ready for that?”

Bold Abigail, she reacts to his challenge to her sense of control with an expression she intends to be defiant. But she sniffles. She breaks eye contact first. Not chastised but not moving forward unilaterally anymore.

“I’m sorry our visit wasn’t more cordial,” he says. “We’ll see each other again soon.”

He offers a small smile which she returns. They leave things unsettled but not antagonistic. Hannibal is satisfied with that. He will let her think for a day and call her tomorrow with an invitation to dinner. The three of them and Freddie Lounds.

Will follows him out of the room, down the hall, and to the visitors station where they return their badges and check out. Hannibal stops outside under the small portico. Will stands next to him, coat still under his arm, staring off into the distance.

“My butcher received a fresh shipment of white shrimp from South Carolina this morning. Harvested yesterday,” Hannibal offers. “I need a native’s opinion of my étouffée.”

Will nods faintly and trudges toward the parking lot, shoulders slumped. Hannibal watches Will surreptitiously as he gets into his car. Coat still off. Too shocked to feel the cold.

He may need another night upstairs, Hannibal muses as he starts his own car.

It’s a risk, a serious one. Letting Will get so close. And yet Hannibal wants him close just as he wants Abigail close. They are family. Both so badly damaged by Garrett Jacob Hobbs, they need each other to heal – to the degree that they can.

And now that Will is experiencing dissociative amnesia, it will be easy to convince him that he’s killed again. Easy to push him just far enough that Jack Crawford will see him as a liability rather than an asset. Then they stand a better chance of being together.

So perhaps it’s only fitting that Abigail’s fathers share a bed from time to time.

Hannibal’s mouth quirks as he considers that he’s going to have to deal with what their teenage daughter did to her sensitive father over dinner this evening. It’s exceedingly domestic, what he’s been doing with Will. All the intimate moments they've shared while cooking and eating. Yet the intimacy is more pleasant than he supposed it would be. Moreover, he can’t hide his delight over Will’s unconscious choice to come to him yesterday after the trauma of the crime scene took his mind from him. It’s equal to the delight he felt when Will joined him in bed last night.

Sitting at a red light, Hannibal allows the image of Will sleeping next to him at dawn to unfurl before him. Will had been completely calm, his heart beating a steady rhythm under Hannibal's hand, his face so relaxed as to be boyish in the fey light. Sleeping like the innocent man he is.

Knowing that he can do that for Will – take away all of his fears – moves Hannibal's spirit as strongly as the finest strains of Bach.

He had allowed himself half an hour of worshipful adoration stoked by unchecked fantasy. Will slept soundly the entire time.

But now as then his instinct tells him not to allow Will so close. Not when he's this volatile. Will's going to get worse long before he gets better. Too deluded by his ridiculous notion of saving unworthy lives at the expense of his own to quit.

And now he wants a brain scan. He'll ask again. But he cannot know about his illness until he gets himself fired or thinks he's killed again.

It's a terrible thing Will does to himself, Hannibal muses as he turns into his driveway. Hurting himself so badly, so often. It's becoming hard to watch. Because, he admits, he's opened himself to too much of Will's suffering. It's going to have to stop.

But maybe not tonight.

It all depends on what happened between Will and Alana earlier today. Well, Hannibal admits to an off-chance that he was upset over something work-related, but save for the death of one of his dogs – something he would call or visit about – only Alana can hurt him so badly. She's talked with him about his hallucinations. Likely told him they cannot be together while his problems persist. Given her depth of feeling for him, the conversation can't have been easy for either of them.

Yes. That would reduce Will to tears.

Hannibal's mouth quirks; he's a little pleased with himself for securing one of Will's favorite foods, fresh, on a day when Will has need of something good in his life. How serendipitous.

He lets himself enjoy the thought even as warning bells clang. Alana is right to protect herself. He should follow her example.

Hannibal has time to hang up his jacket, tie, and vest, and don his apron before he hears Will at the door. Will offers him a bottle of wine as he steps inside, his coat forgotten in the car.

"Tried this with my étouffée last week," Will says, his eyes cast on the floor and posture telegraphing rejection. "Not sure it's up to your standards, but I thought it worked okay."

Hannibal smiles as he takes the bottle and mentally alters one ingredient in the meal so it will match the wine. "I'm sure it will pair well."

He puts his hand on Will's back as Will comes in. Will doesn't acknowledge him. Just stoops to untie his shoes.

Hannibal waits until he has Will chopping celery and peppers to broach the topic of their visit to Port Haven.

“I think we should invite Abigail and Ms. Lounds to dinner. Discuss this book project.”

Will chops fiercely, eyes focused on the knife, taking his anger out on the innocent butcher’s block.

“What’s there to discuss,” he says flatly without looking up.

“Abigail will be 18 in three months,” Hannibal supplies. “We need to cultivate our relationship with her. Just as we must protect her, we must also listen. Treat her like the young woman she is.”

Will chops even more loudly. “Are you implying I treated her like a child?” He doesn't look up. Vitriol drips from his voice.

“No,” Hannibal answers calmly, “though she did act like one.”

Hannibal watches as Will’s face softens. Will keeps his eyes on the pepper he’s chopping, but the subtle change in his expression shows how much that comment meant to him. It was unnecessarily hurtful of Abigail to say that to Will. She couldn’t know that she’s the second of the two significant women in Will’s life to reject him today. But she could and did know how much her words would hurt him.

Hannibal stirs the roux and waits for Will to speak, wondering where the evening will take them. Will has had two very difficult days. He may seek solace in the solitude of his little house and his dogs. But he knows nightmares await him there. Dogs can do only so much.

Will’s frustrated exhale makes Hannibal look up. His face has darkened again.

“Abigail’s being manipulated,” Will spits the word out, emphasizing each syllable, “by Freddie Lounds. Who are we really listening to?”

“All the more reason to have them both over.”

Will tilts his head, grudgingly acknowledging the point. Hannibal watches him finish the celery and peppers and start on an onion.

Halfway through the onion, Will sighs and nods: it’s settled.

“I’ll try to be civil,” Will volunteers, hackles still raised, “but no promises.”

Hannibal’s mouth quirks as he recalls Will’s threat during their last encounter with Freddie Lounds.

It’s not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living.

He lets Will simmer while he cooks the vegetables down. Once the roux also simmers, Hannibal prepares dough for a dessert of beignets.

Will stares into space, strangely inscrutable. Perhaps not entirely present.

Several minutes pass before Will notices that Hannibal is watching him.

He blinks and smiles nervously and says, “How long have you been watching me?”

“How long have you been staring at the refrigerator?”

Will ducks his head, slightly embarrassed.

“Something happened today,” Hannibal prompts.

“A lot happened today,” Will says sardonically.

“You were upset about something when you arrived at the hospital,” Hannibal encourages.

Will looks away and sighs.

Hannibal waits a beat. “If you’d rather not talk about it...”

Will shakes his head. Blinks unsteadily. “No, ah, it’s fine.”

He glances from one part of the floor to another and back as if searching for the right words.

“Ah, Alana came to talk to me.”

Rubs his neck. Wriggles his fingers near his thigh. Smiles nervously.

“Said she has feelings for me… but she can’t be with me while I’m… unstable.”

The last word falls from Will’s lips like a door closing. Hannibal lets the words linger in the room for a moment.

“She’s protecting herself,” he says, kneading the dough.

“I know,” Will says with a sigh. “She should.”

Hannibal nods and they exchange an expression that acknowledges the correctness of her choice, even as Will laments it and Hannibal feels badly for both of them.

“You’re having a rough week, my friend,” Hannibal says with just enough cheer to get Will to smile. “The case is going well, I hope?”

Will comes to life as he describes the totem pole and airs his theories. After a while, he slows, troubled again.

“Jack didn’t notice,” he says hollowly.

“That you disassociated?”

Will nods a fraction of an inch.

Hannibal shrugs. “It’s not always noticeable. You must have acted normally.”

That seems to trouble Will further. Hannibal sees the thought form: *And when I don’t…?*

Will wanders into the dining room. Hannibal hears him setting the table. He waits until they're well into dinner to try to draw Will out of his sulk.

“So,” Hannibal ventures conversationally, “how does it stack up?”

Will is bewildered for a moment. “Oh, ah – it’s the best I’ve ever had.” He flushes and sighs. “I’m not good company tonight. Sorry.”

“You have every reason to be troubled, Will,” Hannibal says.

Will nods.

“However poorly the day treated you, you were right about one thing,” Hannibal offers.

Will glances up curiously.

Hannibal holds out his glass, glancing at the wine.

Will’s mouth quirks as his muscles work their way into a genuine smile. His glass meets Hannibal’s with a soft *tink*. They drink and Hannibal pours them both liberal final glasses. Will’s smile stays on his face as he finishes his dinner, which quickly garners all of his attention. Wasn’t tasting it until his spirits were lifted, Hannibal notes.

Hannibal catches Will glancing coquettishly at him through his lashes. Artificially. Will feels he owes something for dinner and a sympathetic ear; he intends to pay in sex. Hannibal wonders whether Will realizes he doesn’t have to do that.

Hannibal waits patiently through dessert and into the dishes. Will usually makes the first move. Perhaps not tonight. Hannibal moves subtly, holding a plate for a second longer than he should to remind Will of his presence, letting their hands overlap as he offers a pan to Will to dry.

While Will puts the last dish away, Hannibal dries his hands and turns to face Will, his posture open and inviting. Will stops a few steps short, contradictory emotions in his eyes: desire, reticence, fear, anxiety, need. Need is strongest. Raw need.

Hannibal closes the distance to place a tender kiss on Will’s lips. Will responds desperately. Hannibal reads from his lips that this will be at turns aggressive and yielding. Give and take. Will has much to express. The part of him that wants to help Will heal whispers that they could go to his bed for this. He nudges Will toward the guest room instead.

They undress between kisses and gropes and wicked expressions.

Will stops just as he kicks his shorts into a corner, skin flushed, erection straining. “You boxed. Did you ever wrestle?”

Hannibal just grins and gets on his knees on the bed. He strokes himself – can't help it, this is what Will does to him – as Will joins him. Grinning madly, also touching himself, Will kneels to square off, using the bed as a ring. They lock arms and push, each testing the other's strength. Hannibal feels Will put his legs into it and responds in kind, each jockeying for position, trying to pin the other. Will holds back enough to indicate that he means to play.

Hannibal counts to twenty before giving in. Will pitches forward into him with a grunt and immediately grabs Hannibal around the waist and twists to drive Hannibal onto his back and pin him. The bed frame creaks dangerously. Will laughs, amused by the possibility of breaking the bed, and leans down to claim Hannibal's mouth.

He's gentler than Hannibal expects but still rather rough. Eager yet also deft. Controlled. Studied. They know each other too well not to settle into familiar rhythms. Hannibal allows Will to choose his favorite position. It speaks well of him that Will prefers to them to see each other when they fuck. Though lately it's felt more like making love.

Desire and need blend in Will's eyes. He's forceful tonight. Hard and fast enough to chip paint off the wall with the headboard. Inventive in his choice of positions.

Will changes the rhythm, slower, sweeter, and bends to kiss Hannibal deeply. When he pulls back, his eyes say that this means everything to him.

Hannibal studies the feeling of making love with Will Graham as best he can with so much pleasure rippling over his body. Will gives enough to satisfy him – plenty to satisfy – but not enough to let him finish. Will intends to tire them both out tonight. Hannibal settles in to be pleasured by Will in any way he chooses.

After a thorough fuck that may be a prelude, Will surprises Hannibal by withdrawing and pulling the condom off with a smack. Hannibal sits up, hazy with pleasure, and looks to Will for direction. Will glances from Hannibal to the drawer, cocks an eyebrow, and lies on his side to catch his breath. As Hannibal rolls on a condom, he notices Will restrain himself from touching his blood-darkened dick. Hannibal burns the moment into his memory.

Most of all, he records Will's eyes. Excitement coils inside Hannibal. Will is entirely unafraid.

Hannibal goes slowly nonetheless, teasing Will before opening him all while lavishing kisses on him so he relaxes into the endorphins. Still, Will gasps when Hannibal fills him. He clings to Hannibal's arms for a moment. Hannibal kisses his neck and jaw while he adjusts, then waits for Will to tell him he's ready. Hannibal gives him a pace he can bear, a pace that makes him gasp with pleasure. Will writhes, ecstasy already written on his face. Hannibal records Will's reactions to his experiments, finding a new combination that writes ecstasy on Will's face.

Eventually, Will wants more. His eyes say so. But he doesn't want a faster or harder stroke. Something different. Will's eyes gleam mischievously as he climbs Hannibal like a jungle gym. He wrestles Hannibal, grappling with him, grinning over the minor displays of strength, and knocks Hannibal onto his back again. Will straddles him and works his way down until

Hannibal’s inside him again. Taking a deep breath, Will takes over, pleasuring himself with Hannibal's cock.

Hannibal watches in amazement as Will allows himself to be primal. There’s no doubt this is how it will end. Will’s going to make him come. He has no choice in the matter. Nor does he want one.

Will keeps his head back while he holds Hannibal’s flanks and slams into him. Harder than he should. They work out a rhythm that tests Will’s limits and Hannibal’s control. Will sweats, chest flushed, as he takes Hannibal as hard and fast as he can. Will finds the final stroke for himself; his body nearing completion brings Hannibal close. Hannibal listens carefully, concentrates on timing, and spills into Will half a second before Will comes on his stomach.

Will rolls off of Hannibal and into a boneless heap beside him, his chest heaving, slick with sweat, limbs limp where they fall.

Hannibal sits up first. He offers Will a cloth and cleans himself.

“I’ll call Mrs. Young.”

It’s easier for Will to say nothing than no when he phrases it like that. Will says nothing. Just squeezes Hannibal’s forearm and closes his eyes.

Will has burrowed under the covers by the time Hannibal returns from calling his neighbor. He’s not asleep but he also doesn’t want to be disturbed. Hannibal leaves him a glass of water, turns off the lamp, and shuts the door.

Two hours later, alone in his room, Hannibal turns onto his side and stretches his hand out across the bed where Will slept last night. Only cool fabric greets him.

Chapter End Notes

The phrase "drooling livers" comes from Queens of the Stone Age's "Mexicola."

This ep has been really fun to fill.

Love-Lies-Bleeding

Chapter Summary

Hannibal convinces Will not to turn Abigail in for killing Nick Boyle. The toll it takes on Will. Trou Normand 3 / 3.

Chapter Notes

I wish I could claim the title as my own. It's another name for amaranth, a flower and grain that was once eaten by humans all over the world. It represents hopelessness or hopeless love in Victorian flower symbolism. It has also been interpreted as representing self-sacrifice based in compassion for humanity, a la Christ. [x]

This is your angst warning.

For one brief, wild moment, Hannibal thinks about plunging the scalpel into Will Graham's carotid and watching the life spray out of him.

Will attacked him, he could say. He could make Jack Crawford believe it, though not if he cuts that vessel. He would have to be more subtle. But Will is barely hiding his aggression. It wouldn't be entirely a lie to say he attacked.

Hannibal fingers the scalpel, sliding it across the top of the drawing.

No.

He has put too much into Will. Will is too special. He remains dangerous, but not so dangerous in this moment that Hannibal cannot work with him.

Hannibal lets go of the scalpel and stands.

"Now you know the truth."

"Do I?" Will asks with that smile that says he thinks the whole world is lying to him.

"Everything you know about that night is true except the end. Nicholas Boyle attacked us. Abigail's only crime was to defend herself and I lied about it."

"Why?" Will asks.

Hannibal sniffs, hand on his hip, “You know why.”

Will turns his back, trying to process his myriad, confused feelings and impulses.

“Because Jack Crawford would hang her for what her father’s done,” Hannibal elaborates.

He and Will must be on the same page about Abigail. There can be no room for error.

“And the world would burn Abigail in his place. That would be the story. That would be what Freddie Lounds writes.”

Will nods his understanding. He approaches the window contemplatively. Perhaps projecting: imagining himself in the house in Minnesota as Abigail. Certainly conflicted by thinking of Abigail as a killer. But realizing that she had to do what she did. And feeling betrayed by them both for not including him.

“Abigail is no more a killer than you are for shooting her father – or I am for the death of Tobias Budge,” Hannibal points out, crossing the room to stand near Will.

“It isn’t our place to decide,” Will says adamantly.

Oh, so that’s it. Will and his conventional morality. He’s had enough time to process his projection of events; morality has caught up with his lightening-quick associations. Then on morality’s grounds Hannibal will fight.

“If not ours, then whose?” Hannibal asks just as adamantly.

Appealing to Will’s sense of duty to Abigail, his strong association with Hobbs, his need to be a good parent, a protective father, so unlike the father he had. The only way to win this disagreement.

“Who knows Abigail better than you and I? All the burden she bears.”

Will cannot resist this line of argument for long.

“We are her fathers now. We have to serve her better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Will still stares. That learned value of decency holds him more strongly than Hannibal suspected. He has more work to do with Will. Much more work.

“If you go to Jack, you murder Abigail’s future.”

For a moment, Hannibal wonders whether Will is aware of his reality, so intently does Will stare out the window.

And so Hannibal is blunt to ascertain Will’s level of awareness.

“Do I need to call my lawyer, Will?”

At length, slowly drawn out of the state of shock this revelation has placed him in, Will shakes his head. Hannibal sees awareness in his eyes. He's just present enough for Hannibal to accept his answer.

"We can tell no one," Hannibal says.

Will turns back to the window, still deeply troubled. Shocked by his associations and their assault on his decency. Shocked that he was lied to. Shocked that Abigail killed.

He needs assurance that what he's done is right. So bound up with conventional morality, he needs to feel good about his choices. He must see that their duty to Abigail outweighs cultural notions of justice.

Hannibal takes the few steps needed to close the distance between them and places his hand on Will's shoulder, squeezing reassuringly.

"What we are doing here is the right thing," he says, telling Will how intently he believes it by tightening his squeeze. "In time, this will be the only story any of us cares to tell."

He gives Will's shoulder a final squeeze and walks to the liquor cabinet to pour them both two fingers of Will's preferred brand.

Will stays at the window long enough for Hannibal to build a small fire in the fireplace. Will is reliving many things tonight. Parsing his associations with decency and obligation; adjusting to the duty to Abigail he must put first. Trying to make sense of his now-scrambled moral hierarchy and the terrible thoughts of Abigail killing and lying to him about it.

Either that or he's dissociating. Hannibal has to admit he would be very excited to see Will dissociate. He hasn't published in a while. Will presents such a fascinating case. With phone calls to the right people, he could get something in a top journal within a year.

Hannibal glances to the second floor, picturing the many journals he's kept on Will. Hours of notes. Written in his own shorthand and hence indecipherable unless a person put considerable time into it. Yes, if this is Will dissociating, he'll be up for hours tonight writing. Of course, he'll be up late regardless, recording Will's revelation and his struggles with social mores and personal duty.

All because he saw the body of Nicholas Boyle. Even with more than three months in the ground – albeit frozen ground – the body showed Will everything his keen mind needed to see.

And so he knows not just that Abigail killed Nick Boyle but that she butchered him. He will know on some level, too, that she did more with her father than anyone but Jack Crawford believes.

Jack Crawford. There's a man Hannibal is glad not to see tonight. A man who will drop by soon if Will's symptoms continue to worsen. Jack's always been worried about his best pony. Even as he destroys Will, Jack worries. Hannibal had supposed the arm of Miriam Lass would elicit more guilt from Jack than Jack has shown. He's let Will go on far longer than

Hannibal suspected he would. He thinks he needs Will. He thinks Will is adjusting to the repeated assault of looking.

Yes, Jack will come to the office soon and sit in front of this fireplace and talk about Will and his own guilt. And maybe then he will act. Or maybe Will's illness will force his hand.

As the fire begins to crack and roar, Hannibal hears Will's scuffling footsteps approach. He's exhausted. More emotionally than physically. He will retreat to his refuge tonight. He must. Solitude salves Will Graham in a way Hannibal can't.

Hannibal sits on his haunches in front of the fire as he hears Will settle into a chair and finger the rim of the glass. Hannibal counts to ten, stands, and backs away from the fire and into his chair.

Hannibal studies him surreptitiously as they both sip the whiskey.

"Why did you think you couldn't tell me?" Will asks, his voice rough with the burden of knowledge. "All this time. You were in Jack's office when he said he wanted Abigail to look at the body. How could you do that to her?"

Hannibal takes a breath. "She did it to herself."

Will's eyes flash. "Wh – "

Hannibal holds a hand up to stop Will's interruption.

"She went back to Minnesota and dug him up. It was her choice." Hannibal sips the whiskey. "She feared his being found and wanted to take control over her fear."

Will's eyebrows jump disbelievingly. "She said this to you."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday. After the body was found. I visited her."

Will nods.

"As to why I couldn't tell you…" Hannibal pauses. Will keeps his eyes on the flames but Hannibal knows he has Will's full attention. "How do you think it would have gone in Jack's office if you'd known?"

Will stares at the flames, looks down at his drink, and sighs. Nods. Sees the wisdom in Hannibal's decision.

"Anything else I should know about?" he asks stiffly.

"No," Hannibal replies.

Five minutes pass in silence as they finish their drinks. Will stands, steadily enough, and goes to collect his jacket. He doesn't look at Hannibal.

Hannibal sees him out, wishing him a good night, and returns to his drawing. The fire warms his back as he places an index finger on the scalpel.

Winston whines and licks Will's hand.

Home dogs cold naked.

Fear bursts inside him. In a panicked breath he sees that he's in his house, the lights are on, the dogs near. He's standing in his underwear in the middle of the living room.

Winston licks his hand again. He pats Winston's nose first, then his head, not taking his eyes from the room as he scans it for any sign of – anything.

What happened?

This again?

He remembers leaving Hannibal's office. Walking out the door. Past the point in the parking lot he never wants to see.

Then Winston licking his hand.

Lost time.

Dissociative amnesia brought on by a traumatic experience.

God. Not again.

Will clenches his jaw against the terror threatening to overwhelm him.

Anything could have happened. Anything.

He shakes. He's shaking. He should, he thinks, be shaking. He should be cold. Terrified. He could have done *anything*.

Will checks his hands, frantically turning them over, examining them for evidence. Clean palms. Clean backs. Clean fingernails. Nothing.

Feet. Also clean. Still in his socks.

He sees that he took off his clothes and did what he usually does with them: hang them up if they can be worn again or, more likely, toss them in the hamper.

The dogs are calm, too. Four curled up in bed, two on their feet but yawning, Winston at his side.

It’s so unnoticeable even the dogs don’t register it?

Will glances at the bowls near the door. Full of water. Empty of food.

So he fed them. He came home from Baltimore, fed the dogs, and took his clothes off.

Getting ready to go to bed.

Then what? Winston nosed him? Licked his hand? Brought him back to reality?

Before he can take a step in any direction, memories flood his vision –

Abigail stabbing him, he’s Nicholas Boyle, sharp pain of the knife in his gut, sharp pain of realization, she killed someone

Can’t breathe. Can’t think.

Abigail killed someone oh god let it not be true let me be wrong for once let it not be can’t be she wouldn’t couldn’t didn’t

Not just killed him but butchered him. Gutted him.

Hannibal’s office place of safety sanctuary refuge can say anything can think anything Hannibal won’t judge won’t leave won’t run won’t betray

"I was hoping it wasn’t true."

Rage, totality of rage, wanting to tear at Hannibal for being so calm, his impassive face, how can he not feel something

His face adamant, insistent. Must protect Abigail

Not our place to decide

Must protect her

"I’m going to be messed up, aren’t I?"

She’s no more guilty than you are for Hobbs or I am for Budge must protect her the world would burn her for what her father did we’re her fathers now Will we must serve her better

"I’m worried about nightmares."

"We’ll help you with the nightmares."

Can’t stop his own nightmares, can’t stop them from becoming hallucinations, taking his reality from him

"I know who I am."

Stag melting to tar

"We must serve her better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs"

Slashing Abigail's throat

"See? See?"

Hobbs' eyes his knowing expression as life leaves

Holding Abigail's neck blood spurting through his fingers life leaving her lying bleeding

Lying

"Killing somebody, even if you have to do it – it feels that bad?"

"It's the ugliest thing in the world."

Lying. Lying to Abigail. A half truth still a lie. Panic fear revulsion horrible horrible guilt gnawing crunching consuming 'til there's nothing left that he recognizes as himself

"I tried so hard to know Garrett Jacob Hobbs. To see him. I got so close to him"

"Sometimes, I felt like we were doing the same things at different times of day, like I was eating or showering or sleeping at the same time he was."

"Even after he was dead?"

"Even after he was dead."

"Like you were becoming him?"

Becoming him god no but yes it's true becoming Garrett Jacob Hobbs

Holding Abigail tight, whispering that he'll make it all go away, slashing, blood spray, life leaving her, lying bleeding

Lying

The ugliest thing in the world, true, so true

But what he didn't tell her

Exhilaration thrill titillation control power absolute power intoxicating power elation elation power running through him like the best adrenaline rush better than any other feeling so strong and true and good to kill

To kill

Killer

Disgust fear revulsion guilt

Power.

No, no, no, not this, not these thoughts, not again

Shaking, stumbling, unraveling, Will backs away from his own thoughts until the bed catches his knees and he falls onto his back. No ceiling in front of his eyes, though, just memories thoughts feelings oppressive like being smothered –

Guilt smothered by guilt

Guilty not possible to expel all the guilt deserves the guilt should suffer it every moment of every day for his failures for everyone one of them he couldn't save for everyone he kills in his mind

"How did you feel seeing Marissa Shuur impaled in his antler room?"

"Guilty."

"Because you couldn't save her?"

"Because I felt like I killed her."

Madness spills over as he stabs the night nurse at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in the chest, picks her up against the supply rack so they're face to face, smells her fear, her desperation, her panic, searches her eyes: terror, shoves her to the floor, calmly straddles her, holds her head still and shushes her, sweating, thrilled by the promise of violence, pushes into her forehead with his thumbs, slides his thumbs down slowly over the eye sockets and into the eyes, yielding balls of flesh, gouges deeply, pleasure of violence, pleasure of her terror and pain, exhilaration power control rippling through him, selects part of an IV stand, strong metal, as she crawls away, stands in front of her, her hands grasping his ankle, climbing his leg, begging silently for mercy, power and strength and pleasure and thrill as he lifts the slender rod and stabs her through the left kidney, pained hands grab his leg then let go, doesn't scream, sobs instead, fearful pained breaths driving him on, power strength control

"I'm worried about you, Will. You empathize so completely with the killers Jack Crawford has your mind wrapped around that you lose yourself to them."

Holding Abigail tightly, saying he'll make it all go away, slashing her neck with the knife, bright spray of life

I got so close to him.

See? See?

Gouging eyes, powerful exhilaration of pressing thumbs into eye sockets, feeling hot blood pulse over and out, his hands wet and sticky, shock of pleasure

Stabbing Joel Summers in the heart, angling up to kill him quickly on the snowy beach, finish his life's work, show everyone who he is, everyone will know

Thrill of driving Hobbs back with bullets, thrill of slashing Abigail's throat, thrill of gouging eyeballs, intensity of power

Guilty secret. Guilty pleasure.

Like you were becoming him?

No no no no no no

Will gasps and presses both hands to his face – face wet with sweat or tears or both, can't tell, doesn't care.

Warmth beside him. Smell of Winston.

Will swallows around the thick swell of memory and emotion. He turns his face into Winston's coat, mumbling to Winston that he isn't supposed to be on the bed, not when he needs a bath as badly as he does. But Will needs more to have the hard bone and strong muscle underneath Winston's silky fur stabilize him. He presses his forehead against Winston's leg and shivers.

Shivering shaking *slashing Abigail's throat gouging eyes intensity of power*

Winston yawns. Hint of a whine at the end. A calming signal both to himself and the shaking human next to him.

"Sorry," Will mumbles into his fur. He reaches up to pat Winston on the back, assure Winston that everything is okay even as both of them know he's lying.

Lying

Lying bleeding

Lying bleeding panting scared guilty

Powerful thrilled controlling

Gutting Nick Boyle

Punching Tobias Budge in the throat throat

Pulling the trigger again and again and again

Driving Hobbs back killing him killing him feeling the power of killing him

Standing next to the rental car watching the body bag come out on a gurney knowing Hobbs is in there, dead, killed, good, right, just

Powerful

"Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?"

"I liked killing Hobbs."

"Killing must feel good to God, too. He does it all the time. And are we not created in His image?"

Powerful

Abigail must have felt powerful, too, for all that she was appalled. Her terrified eyes glance from the knife in Will's gut to Will's eyes, afraid of what she's done.

"Just because you killed my dad doesn't mean you get to be him."

It'll all go away, he murmurs lovingly into her ear, holding her tightly so she won't struggle

Slashes her throat

He's doing this because he loves her

Loves her

Would do so much for her. Would do anything.

We are her fathers now. We must serve her better. We can tell no one. What we are doing here is the right thing.

He advances on Hannibal swinging strings he meant to use as a garrote catching Hannibal's arm below the wrist, pulling him forward, swift kick to the abdomen, driving him back, Hannibal coming toward him with blows he barely feels, grabbing the letter opener and stabbing deep into Hannibal's thigh, kicking him repeatedly in the abdomen, the mouth, the nose, feeling none of the return blows, focused on one thing only

Killing must feel good to God.

Kicking, grabbing, wrestling, anything to gain the upper hand, anything to kill

Anything to pin him and gouge his eyes and feel his hot blood pouring out onto powerful murderous hands

Will rockets off the bed, propelled by the force of his own terror, trips dizzily across the room, stumbles and falls onto all fours, chest heaving with terror.

For a moment, he thinks he's going to vomit up all the guilt and fear and disgust. He coughs and gags, still seeing his thumbs gouge Hannibal's eyes out.

Blood.

Tar.

Eyes.

He needs to bring up something. Can't just retch emptily.

But there's nothing in him to come up.

Eventually, it passes. His vision clears. Familiar hardwood floor swims in front of him.

No pool of blood. No gouged eye sockets. No stain of guilt.

Will falls onto his side, panting, feeling not cleansed or purged but dirtier than before. He coughs. Wants to spit but doesn't.

Ella, Winston, Jackson – all of them surround him, some sniffing, someone whining, all dancing anxiously, their claws clicking on the floor, feeling his distress, wanting to help.

Will puts a hand out blindly and rubs the first dog he touches.

Ella. Coarse fur, warm body.

Shaking. She's shaking. Ella's shaking.

"No, no, no," he says, pushing himself up until he's sitting.

He pulls her onto his crossed legs and pets her head, behind her ears, along her back. Her tiny paws dig into his bare flesh.

"It's okay," he says, holding her and rocking them both back and forth, "it's okay."

Her curled tail doesn't wag. She sniffs. Shakes her head. Yawns.

"You're okay."

The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else.

Hannibal, whole and unharmed, rises in his mind, reflected by the mirrors. Steady. Rock. Paddle. Anchor.

Relying too much on Hannibal. Burdening him with too much.

Anger flashes. Hannibal lied to him.

How do you think it would have gone in Jack's office if you'd known?

Ella senses anger and squirms out of his grasp. Will presses elbows into knees and cradles his head, pain booming between his ears.

He gets to his feet with a groan and wanders to his corduroys. Digs out aspirin. Shakes two into his palm and swallows them quickly. He drops the pants in a heap of fabric on the floor and wanders to the kitchen and the bottle of George T. Stagg, smirking not the first time at the irony of the name.

Will pours himself two fingers and sits at the kitchen table, eyeing the amber liquid.

He's tempted tonight. He needs respite. At the very least, he needs distance.

This is distance.

Will swallows the whiskey but doesn't pour a second glass. Not yet. Moderation. See how this glass affects him first.

Will laughs a little to himself. Dad never met a beer or a bottle of whiskey he didn't like. How much that used to bother him. How little it bothers him now. How remote it seems, like the winking lights of a ship off the coast in the dark. Unthreatening.

Because what does it matter if he drinks? He's dissociating, hallucinating, sleepwalking, and most of the time his head feels like it's going to split open. He just imagined himself killing Hannibal. The person most important to him in his life. Alcoholism pales in comparison to the fucked up things going on in his head.

No. This – whatever this is, this is going to get him first.

So why not have another drink?

Two more fingers, measured out. Will caps the bottle and sets it aside. He turns the glass, looking into the amber.

Hannibal and Abigail lied to him. They had to lie. He acknowledges that. Hannibal could call 911 when he killed in self-defense. Abigail couldn't. Not without being put on trial for her father's crimes. Jack wouldn't hear of anything else if he knew.

So of course he can't know.

And then there's Abigail. Who had to defend herself. Who was attacked by Nicholas Boyle, the same boy who tried to attack both Abigail and Marissa Shuur. Who wanted revenge for his sister Cassie. Who had every reason to want to hurt Abigail.

The knife. Where did she get the knife? Why did she have a hunting knife in her hands?

Anywhere in that house she could have gotten a hunting knife. The detail isn't odd.

It hardly matters. She had to kill.

Couldn't injure. The world would burn her for that, too.

Did she know she had to kill him?

Did she repress the act at any point?

Hannibal said she went to Minnesota and dug him up.

Must have known it. Must have lied to him the entire time.

Killing somebody, even if you have to do it – it feels that bad?

Did she know then? Is Jack right about her manipulating him?

No, no, no. Jack's wrong. She didn't help her father. She had to defend herself. She had to lie about it.

And Hannibal's right. Will wouldn't have been able to keep it off his face. Jack would have found out.

That can't happen. He has to protect Abigail. Surrogate or otherwise, she's their daughter. They're the only family she has. For him, too, though he's reluctant to think of anyone as family. But only the two of them know what's happening with him, too.

He understands her better now. The thing she had to do. Family.

Will absently rubs his stomach where Abigail stabbed him. He closes his eyes and rubs at the ache behind them. A hallucination was helpful for once. Well, if he's going to have them, they may as well help him out.

If he's going to have them. He needs a brain scan. Hannibal may be right that it's stress from work but that's no reason to rule out other causes. Will makes a note to bring it up again. Maybe tomorrow.

Tomorrow. When they have dinner arranged with Abigail and Freddie Lounds.

God.

Will drinks the whiskey in one swallow.

He feels it warm his blood. Feels the haze start to come over him. On a good night, he can get to sleep like this.

He runs his finger along the lip of the glass, catching stray molecules of alcohol.

Tonight is not a good night.

Winston noses his hand. Will smiles crookedly at him and ruffles the fur under his ears. This is all he really needs. Just this.

Tomorrow, they'll go outside and play together until he's too tired to keep up with them.

Dogs keep a promise a person can't.

Every reason to keep dogs, Will thinks, as he pours another two fingers. These will be his last. He isn't his father. He isn't some goddamn drunk. He has a choice in this.

Even if a man hallucinating is just as unstable as a drunk. Will glances through watery eyes at the living room. At the spot where he kissed her. Where she kissed back.

He gulps down the whiskey.

He gives himself a moment, then stands and stumbles and laughs. Stupid fucking drunk.

Just be drunk enough to sleep, he thinks as he works his way through the house, turning off the lights and locking the door. Be drunk enough not to dream for a while.

Will slides into bed loose-limbed and clumsy, only half-covered by the blanket.

He stares at the ceiling, his head spinning, for an amount of time he can't measure.

Everything is quiet in his house. Everyone's settled down. No noises from outside. Just the faint hum of the refrigerator and the occasional snuffle or shift of one of the dogs.

Nothing is quiet in his head.

He thinks about trees this time. Cypress trees. Covered in Spanish moss.

But the scene is too depressing.

He shifts instead to the Blue Ridge. Oaks, hickories, poplars, maples. Fine tall trees.

Whiskey calms him. He breathes evenly.

But time passes and he doesn't sleep.

A questioning snuffle comes from his right. Winston.

Always so perceptive.

Will sighs. "Okay. Come on."

He pats the bed and the mattress dips as Winston hops up. Winston curls close and Will puts an arm around him. This is all he needs. This is clarity. This is distance. At length, the calming warmth of Winston's body lowers Will into sleep.

When Will thrashes awake two hours later, Winston is gone.

How to Disappear Completely

Chapter Summary

Will slowly loses his mind. Buffet Froid 1 / 1.

An intelligent psychopath […] is hard to catch for several reasons First, there's no traceable motive. So you can't go that way. And most of the time you won't have any help from informants. […] He *may not even know he's doing it.*

- Will Graham in *Red Dragon*

I'm not here
This isn't happening

- Radiohead, "How to Disappear Completely"

There isn't much that doesn't make it's own kind of weird sense anymore. Or maybe Will Graham is just too tired to ask the right questions.

And so nothing seems amiss about catching trout the size of salmon behind his house in February. Pleased with the size and number of the fish on his stringer, Will lets himself in and strips off the down-stuffed vest, jacket, and gloves. Not only will he eat well today and tomorrow, he'll have a few fillets left over to freeze. Quite a successful morning.

Will thumbs mentally through the recipes he has for trout as he puts a kettle on the stove for hot tea. Something simple tonight: a fillet baked in lemon juice, olive oil, and white wine with mushrooms, parsley, thyme, and crushed red pepper. Rice and asparagus on the side.

Or maybe that will be lunch. Yes. That will be lunch.

Will smiles to himself as he thinks about the day he's had so far – glance at the newspaper with breakfast, walk to the stream, fight three enormous trout hard enough to make his arms sore, walk home – and the sense he has that it'll stay a good day: clean the fish, play with the dogs, enjoy his favorite lunch, then a nap and all afternoon to tinker with that motor.

Tea made, Will slips his best fillet knife out of its sheath and cuts into the biggest fish as he learned to do as a boy.

Blood pours out of the fish. Will stops cutting and stares at the fish as blood pools under it. The smell of fresh trout becomes the smell of a fresh body: sharp, bitter, tangy.

For a moment, Will feels like he's falling backwards into empty space. For a moment, he feels like he's dying.

Fish transmutes to woman coughing blood, dark pool of blood *because he wanted her dead she had to die he had to overpower her slice her cheeks from lip to ear while she still drew breath while she grabbed his arm trying to still the knife in his hand trying to fight back but she can't she's too cut up*

This isn't happening this can't be happening this isn't happening

Will scrambles to his feet to flee.

This can't be happening this isn't real didn't do this can't be didn't do

Someone's attic room. He doesn't recognize it, doesn't know how he got here, but he knows didn't do this didn't can't

Can't be here didn't do this isn't happening isn't real didn't

Blood roars in his ears as he turns to look at the room, the dying woman, the pool of blood. The doorknob won't turn, his fingers are too wet, too slick, it must turn it has to

not here isn't happening not real didn't do this not real not here isn't happening didn't do it

Finally the knob turns under his slick fingers and he falls into the hallway, thinking only of escape, and

Jack

Jack

Jack's here

Not real. Not. Real. Not.

Hallucination lost time something else not real.

Not. Real.

Didn't happen. Didn't kill anyone. Crime scene. Jack and Price and Katz and Zeller. Crime scene. Didn't kill anyone.

The door frame digs into Will's back as his panicked breathing slows and a wash of embarrassment and relief lets him feel the floor under his feet instead of the terrible sense of falling through thin air.

Not real. Didn't kill anyone. Just got lost.

Will sees the concern in Jack's face as he leads the others down the stairs. When the last back rounds the corner, Will slumps to the floor and breathes and holds his bloody arms out in

front of him and wonders what the hell just happened.

He's *got* to get a brain scan. Whatever's wrong with him, it's not just his problem anymore. Now it's Jack's problem, too. Will knows that if he loses control over himself like that again, Jack will send him back to the classroom. Maybe not for good but for a while. A while would be too long.

What Jack doesn't understand – can't understand – what even Hannibal doesn't really understand – is that he has control over his own thoughts only when he's analyzing. If he doesn't have a puzzle, doesn't have a case, everything that he's seen swirls in front of him and he can't stop his thoughts from ricocheting like a bullet around the inside of his skull.

He can't stop the work he does. *Can't*. That's the surest way to send him into madness.

It wasn't always like this. He was okay, more or less, before he went to West Virginia. Sleeping enough. Eating enough. Hell, he'd been doing well before he went to West Virginia. A lot of it was Hannibal. Shit, with Hannibal, he'd been doing so well that he'd begun to suspect he might be happy.

Not anymore. Not since he started losing time. He knows too well what he's capable of and knows even better that not all psychopaths know they're committing crimes. Multiple personality disorder. Except that he's himself when he dissociates – or seems to be since neither Jack nor his dogs noticed and presumably he wasn't acting strangely before he went into the room today.

Will's hands start to shake.

He knows he's not a killer. Not a killer. Not.

Factually, he couldn't have killed that woman in there. But beyond the facts, one of the few certainties he has about himself is that he's not a killer. He isn't Garrett Jacob Hobbs. No matter how much part of him thinks so, he's isn't. He's Will Graham.

He checks his watch, wiping the blood off of the face, and mumbles to himself, "It's 10:14 a.m. I'm at a crime scene. My name is Will Graham."

Hannibal's words echo in his head.

I'm worried about you, Will. I don't want you to wake up and see a totem of your own making.

Hannibal knew this would happen. Of course he knew. Of course he offered a warning.

Will curses to himself, wishing his hands weren't covered in blood so he could run them over his splitting head.

Now he has a mess to clean up.

Will forces himself to his feet. He isn't shaking any more. He doesn't have the capacity to shake. Fear is too constant a companion. It sharpens each sensation into the fine point of a

fish hook and tugs. Will hears the rip of skin separating from muscle.

As Will descends the stairs, he tries not to think of himself as a fish on a line or Elliot Budish or anyone else but Will Graham. Doubt nestles at the base of his amygdala like a tumor.

Hannibal senses an opportunity when Will calls before lunch and can't hide how distraught he is.

"I got lost at a crime scene," Will says over the phone.

Hannibal hears the hum of Will's car in the background. Driving back from the scene.

"You lost time?"

"No, I got lost." Will over-enunciates. Frightened enough to be rude. "I need to talk."

Hannibal's afternoon appointments drag on unmercifully as he wonders what scared Will so thoroughly. Got lost a crime scene and found himself committing the crime. What sort of murder was it this time?

Once he sees his six o'clock out, Hannibal climbs to the second floor, selects his current journal on Will, and fills three pages with shorthand only he can decipher.

Will is tense when he arrives at 7:30. Haunted by the morning's terror, by the violence he saw himself committing. He won't sit as he describes his actions and associations.

"I know I didn't kill her. I couldn't have."

Hannibal hears his doubt. Will knows he didn't kill her only because circumstances didn't allow it. Others saw her body before Will did.

Too bad.

"But I remember cutting into her. I remember watching her die."

He's as upset as Hannibal has seen him in this office.

"You must overcome these delusions that are disguising your reality."

Will acknowledges the point with a gesture, tapping his hand on the ladder.

"What kind of savage delusions does this killer have?" Hannibal asks.

"It wasn't savage," Will says, leaning back against the ladder, "it was lonely."

And the way he says it, the way he sinks into the ladder, his posture telegraphing his needs – part of Hannibal aches for him. Longs to touch him until he forgets his fear.

"It was desperate. It was sad."

But Will Graham the person is less interesting than Will Graham the subject. Perhaps it's always been that way.

"I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I looked right through me – past me – as if I was just a stranger."

Hannibal stands up and takes a few steps until he's in Will's intimate space.

"You have to honestly confront your limitations with what you do. And how it affects you."

Will leans back and his body screams *hold me-fuck me-help me* so loudly that Hannibal has to stop himself. Will hasn't made eye contact with him once this evening. He's regressing. He doesn't know the message he sends with his body. Too upset to know.

"If by limitations you mean the difference between sanity and insanity, I don't accept that," Will says.

Hannibal can smell on Will the low-grade fever, the sleepless nights, the excess of coffee and paucity of food. His fear smells sharper, his illness hotter and sweeter. Intensified. Soon he will burn more brightly than anyone can handle.

"What do you accept?"

"That I know what kind of crazy I am and this isn't that kind of crazy."

And how he fights. How he struggles. How strong he remains. Deluded, yes, but so strong.

"But if it isn't physiological, then you have to accept what you are struggling with is mental illness."

Hannibal envisions his reaction: silent fear, quiet rage, dead affect. Anger and denial will come first, strongest, and longest. Depression will soon follow. Then he'll bargain. When will he accept? To what extremes will the news drive him?

As much as Hannibal would enjoy taking Will in his arms right now and soothing Will's fears, the conflagration is far too awe-inspiring to interrupt.

Hannibal turns his back on Will and smiles.

Will knows he shouldn't be driving. Screams still echo in his head from yesterday. He scrubbed his arms raw in the shower when he got home from Baltimore but he still can't get the smell of blood off of them. Everything that passes his lips tastes of ash and dust.

Burnt gas station coffee lingers on the back of his tongue as he cuts the crime scene tape and climbs the stairs in Beth LeBeau's house. The same sick, heavy weight that settled onto his shoulders when the MRI showed nothing wrong with him drove him back to this bedroom tonight. The blood-soaked floor shouts at him through the darkness.

Then he sees someone under the bed. Human but only just so. Jaundiced. Sick.

Fear prickles the hairs on his arms as he slowly kneels. Whoever she is, she was here when they were or she knows an entrance they didn't tape up. Something's wrong with her. He knows that just as surely as he knows he isn't any more crazy now than he was a few months ago.

She flips the bed up and adrenaline courses through his veins. He grabs her as she runs past and her skin slides off her arm like a snake's and –

He's in the woods, his feet ache, and he's exhausted. He knows she's here with him. Leaves crunch underfoot as Will checks his watch and calls out to her.

She's as alive as he is. She can be helped. She can be saved. He doesn't know how he knows these things - just that he knows them.

He affirms her life and his several times before he thinks to get out his phone and open the GPS. Once he points himself in the right direction, he calls Katz. There's evidence in Beth LeBeau's bedroom and no one better to handle it than Katz.

It takes Will over an hour to get back to LeBeau's house. He sweats and curses and stumbles through the woods, still burning adrenaline though he can feel in the ache of his body that he's nearly out of it. He remembers what he read about deadly force encounters. How they can mimic war. How the body can produce adrenaline only so long in a fight before it runs out and can't react any longer. But the mind can. The mind always knows fear.

Will pops aspirin for his feet and his head, and tries not to think about how he managed to wander two miles in two and a half hours or what else he may have done during that time.

If he weren't nearly numb, physically incapable of being otherwise, he'd be soaked in fear. It's not a bad thing, really, this numbness. The sense of being wrapped in cotton annoys him because it stunts his thinking, but he can't feel and it's so good not to feel.

As he waits for Katz, Will is grateful for numbness in an abstract, theoretical way that has nothing to do with his heart. None of his terrors can touch him in any meaningful way.

Headlights in the distance cast eerie shadows through the trees. Will checks his watch. 2:45 a.m. Greenwood, Delaware. Will Graham. He mutters the words to himself.

This is real. This is now. This is happening. He's alive. He's in the objective reality he shares with others.

Exhaustion weighs him down. That's another way he knows he's in reality: he can feel his body. Aching, sleep-deprived, thick and stupid. Probably needs to be fed and watered.

He stands still, listening to himself breathe, as Katz gets out of the car and walks toward the house. He shows his location by pointing the flashlight at the ground near her. Though she looks uncertain, she follows him silently up the stairs.

"Why did you call me? Why not Jack or the police?"

Katz has never been anything but honest with him. Will returns her honesty with his own.

“I called you because I’m not entirely sure that what I saw was real.”

Emotion wells up through the numbness. Fear makes his stomach churn. His smile warps around bone-shearing terror.

Katz looks away, momentarily uncomfortable with his admission. He feels for a second like he’s falling, like he’s dying, but then she speaks again and quells his fear.

“Then let’s prove it.”

Her words kick his mind into gear. Analysis is control.

“I grabbed her arm,” he says, mimicking the motion he made, “and an entire layer of dead skin separated from the underlying tissue like she was wearing a glove.”

Katz nods. “That’s why she doesn’t bleed.”

“Right,” he answers immediately, his mind clicking along like an fine-tuned engine. “There’s no circulation. There’s nothing alive in the tissue to bind it.”

This. This is what he needs. Analysis is safety.

“What did you do with it?”

Memory, association, fear. Analysis derailed. Will takes a breath around rising panic.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t remember?” Katz asks.

Worried. She sounds worried. Shit.

A flash of memory from kindergarten: Wanting so badly to belong, aping the other kids’ ways, doing his very best, and then that moment when he said the wrong thing and Bobby Hebert looked at him and said loudly in front of the whole class, *You’re weird*. And he wanted to punch Bobby Hebert's fat nose but he was too hurt by someone giving voice to his private terror to do anything but stare at the ground. It hurt too much after that to look people in the eye. Not that he did it often before, but later in life when he tried to figure himself out, he always went back to this moment as the origin of his discomfort with eye contact.

Anger. Shame. Isolation. Longing. They sting no less now than they did when he was five.

Katz sighs. “Could be a staphylococcal infection.”

Will’s mind skips back to analysis and he can breathe again.

“That, or leprosy,” Katz speculates.

“Her eyes were discolored,” Will adds, walking and talking, running through ideas, looking on his memory like an observer rather than a victim. “She was malnourished. Jaundiced. Her

liver was shutting down. She was…" he stops, searching for the right word, "deranged."

Katz nods. "So she mutilated a woman's face because she thought it was a mask."

Will runs through his store of psychiatric and medical knowledge and hits on something.

"She can't see faces. If she did kill Beth LeBeau, she might not even know she did it."

Fear sparks distantly. A voice whispers inside that he's *just like her*. Whatever's wrong with her, he has it, too.

"Then why did she come back?"

He can ignore the voice as long as he's working.

"To convince herself she didn't."

"Is that why you came back?"

Anger. Shame. Isolation. Longing.

"If - if I wasn't clear on that issue," he says, advancing on her, "I know I didn't kill Beth LeBeau."

He stops, realizing he's being aggressive.

"I just want to know who did."

Katz stands her ground. "Me, too."

"Yeah," Will whispers, looking around the room, hoping he hasn't fucked things up with Katz.

"You're the subject of a lot of speculation at the Bureau," Katz says plainly.

Will laughs inside. He can't remember not being the subject of a lot of speculation.

"Oh, yeah? What are they speculating."

"That Jack pushed you right up to the edge… and now you're pushing yourself over."

She looks directly at him. She isn't afraid of him. She wouldn't have come if she was. She's just honest. Will doesn't know how to thank her for that gift. Hell, he can't even look her in the eye.

"This killer… can't accept her reality," he says, doing his best to keep emotion under control. "I can occasionally identify with that."

He feels himself shaking inside his skin. He needs all of his control to keep it from showing. He trains his eyes on the details of the room, glancing up the ceiling, past the dresser, toward the bed.

“That said, I feel relatively sane.”

He spares a glance in Katz’s direction and turns away from her, absorbing the scene again, keeping himself under control.

“So how do we catch her?” Katz asks.

Will runs his flashlight over the ceiling again. “We don’t,” he answers. “She comes to us.”

Waking up in the woods a few hours ago flashes in front of him. He knew she was there with him. He wanted so badly to help her.

“Or she stays out there until she dies of exposure or liver failure… or the coyotes get her.”

He hears Katz thinking and breathing. “Then there’s nothing else we can do here.”

Will shines the light on the lamp next to the bed. “No.”

“Can you make it home okay?”

Will glances at her. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Okay,” Katz says. He hears her uncertainty about him again. This time it’s motivated by friendly concern and hence is easier to bear. “Call if you need anything.”

Will hums a yes, still looking around the room, and listens to her walk down the stairs. He waits until he hears her get into her car and start the engine. Something compels him to imagine himself as this sick, deranged woman who can’t see faces and may not know she’s alive. He fights the urge. He doesn’t need to do it for the case and he doesn’t need to feel what she felt in that moment. He has too many of his own associations with that moment.

Will seeks numbness as he walks down the stairs and out of the house. He needs to feel nothing. Exhaustion helps. He slides into numbness before he crosses the state line.

It’s nearly 4 a.m. when he pulls into his driveway. The dogs yawn at him as they shake off sleep to greet him. He pets them but can’t rouse any feeling. Nor does he want to.

Will strips off his clothes, lies down, and stares at the ceiling.

He blinks and it’s 8:34 a.m. and everything hurts. He nibbles on toast. Strong coffee and aspirin.

The day passes in a blur. Will wakes up at his desk at 2:57 p.m. to find Katz offering him a forensics report and a sympathetic look, then again at 5:29. At least this time he didn’t oversleep and worry Hannibal. Will can’t attach feelings to that consolation as he drives to Baltimore.

Hannibal. He’s the one light in the darkness Will has left. Except that he can’t drag Hannibal down with him. Alana was right to pull away. Will doesn’t want to hurt Hannibal and doesn’t

want to be hurt by him. It's easier to beg off now when Hannibal issues invitations. And anyway, his excuses are true. He's felt like crap all week.

Numbness. Just stay numb. He's been thinking all day about the similarities between himself and this woman. She's not sure she's alive. He's not sure he's awake. He knows he can help her.

Hannibal's on the second floor when Will opens the door.

"Good evening, Will," he says with a smile. He's in that shirt that's the color of cooked salmon and if Will were feeling better, he'd have no trouble imagining himself ripping that shirt off of Hannibal. Instead, he merely folds his coat over the couch.

Hannibal nods to an open journal on his desk. "Would you draw a clock for me?"

Will watches him select something from a shelf and walk to the ladder. He shrugs and rounds the desk to sit in Hannibal's chair.

"It's 7:05 p.m.," he says as he draws. "I'm in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is Will Graham."

"Thank you for humoring me," Hannibal says as he carries a book and a box shaped like a book to the desk. Will offers him the journal. He isn't the least bit curious about what Hannibal brought down from the second floor.

"I feel like I'm seeing a ghost," Will says.

"Regarding this killer or yourself?"

"Both."

"She's real. You know she's real. There's evidence. When you found her, your sanity did not leave you."

"But time did."

Hannibal looks up, concerned. "You lost time again?"

Will merely blinks and tilts his head just so in response. Part of Will wishes that Hannibal would treat him differently now that they know it's mental illness. Then it would be easier for Will to ignore every stifled glance and halted gestured and unspoken word of invitation. He knows Hannibal too well now not to see that Hannibal wants to take him home and feed him and touch him until he feels something again. It's been over a week since he saw Hannibal outside the office. The absence digs into his side like a cramp.

"I spoke with Dr. Sutcliffe. We briefly discussed the particulars of your visit. Would you like to discuss them with me?"

"There are no particulars. He didn't find anything wrong."

“Then we keep looking for answers.”

He sounds so confident that he’ll find something. That he can fix Will. Will sees rather than feels hope try to spark in his chest. He envisions Hannibal as a piece of steel striking him, himself as flint, and he sees the spark. But the spark doesn’t catch. No tender inside him to light anymore.

“Perhaps you would permit me to run some tests of my own.”

Hannibal has brushes and – and he’s arranging some kind of test. Will sees anger inside himself like a flaming sun in a dark universe. Associations burst like supernovae in his peripheral vision. Every request he’s ever gotten to consent to be studied. Bobby Hebert’s sneering face.

“You wouldn’t publish anything about me, would you Dr. Lecter?”

In Hannibal’s answer Will reads a yes that he can’t really contest. Abstracted as to be totally unrecognizable. It sounds like bullshit but he can’t bring himself to call Hannibal out. To do so would be to edge up against the trust he has and he can’t do that right now.

“Just do me a favor and publish it posthumously.”

“After your death or mine?”

“Whichever comes first.”

He sees his own death in its many violent variations. Shot. Stabbed. Strangled. Skinned. Starved. Beaten. Drowned. Asphyxiated. Crucified. Tortured. Immolated. Disemboweled. Beheaded. Exsanguinated. Executed.

“Have you considered Cotard’s Syndrome? It’s a rare delusional disorder in which a person believes he or she is dead.”

“You talkin’ about the killer or me?”

“The killer, of course.”

“Of course,” Will echoes, sitting forward to rest his elbows on the desktop, marshaling his mind through the haze of tiredness. “Um, she couldn’t see the victim’s face – or she was trying to uncover it.”

“The inability to identify others is associated with Cotard’s. It’s a misfiring in the areas of the brain which recognize faces, and also in the amygdala which adds emotion to those recognitions.”

Will nods, thinking of her frightened face peeking out from under the bed.

“Even those closest to her would seem like imposters,” Hannibal says, leaning closer, watching for Will’s reaction.

“So, she reached out to someone she loved, someone she trusted… She felt betrayed. Became violent.”

It’s all falling into place now.

“She can’t trust anyone she once knew to be trustworthy.”

He stares directly at Will and Will knows this is a test.

“Her mental illness won’t let her.”

He glances up at Hannibal and then away, looking all over the room, taking in nothing. He won’t be provoked if that’s what Hannibal’s trying to do.

Hannibal in his robe standing next to the French press early in the morning two months ago flashes before him.

Are you experiencing difficulty with aggressive feelings?

The answer had been yes then. It’s yes now, too, but his aggression and anger may as well be trapped under a glass case. Hermetically sealed. He’s grateful again for numbness.

Will sits numbly through a series of tests meant to measure his perceptions and associations. As he answers, he sees himself adding specimens to shelves in a display case that extends infinitely in both directions. Evidence tags hang off each violent thought. Associations cluster around them like moons orbiting a planet, held in place by gravity even as each one wants to spin off on its own.

To Hannibal he must seem like the most spectacularly violent Wunderkammer. A cabinet of curiosities labeled *Will Graham’s Madness*.

To Will, it’s the same grotesque interiority that makes waking feel like dreaming and dreaming feel like waking. The whole sick slipstream slides along like a river seeking an ocean. He has no paddle, no rudder, no sail, no motor, no anchor. Not even a piece of driftwood to help him hold his head above water.

Hours later, Will dreams of boiling and drowning in the Mississippi, of killing Beth LeBeau with a fillet knife, of gouging Hannibal’s eyes out.

In the morning, he can’t make himself eat. Even coffee is hard to choke down. Winston ignores the food Will puts in his bowl, following Will around instead and whining. Will pats his head without feeling. Winston sits in the middle of the living room as Will locks the door. Will can’t look at him.

Jack comes to get him ten minutes before 10 a.m. Found out who the woman is. Tissue match.

Georgia Madchen is her name. Her mother looks just like her. Will listens and asks questions and remains professional. He hears his own symptoms spoken back to him. Jack looks over. Will keeps his eyes on Mrs. Madchen.

“What did her doctors say?”

“Not much…”

He hears his own experiences spoken to him by a stranger. Jack slides a photo over to him. A pretty young woman smiling in a photo like every other pretty young woman smiling in every other photo. Will sees only her frightened eyes. Feels only the sleeve of skin sloughing off.

“They didn’t ever tell me what was wrong.”

Will looks up worriedly. “You still don’t know?”

Mrs. Madchen smiles as emotion wells up inside her the way it wells up inside him.

“They would just say it was this or it was that. You know, they would just… They were just always guessing.”

He’s so closed off that he can’t feel her despondency. But he can hear Jack thinking. He looks over at Jack and then down, seeing Jack’s knowing gaze out of the corner of his eye.

“…mostly what I learned is how little is actually known about mental illness. All they know, it’s rarely about finding solutions. It’s just more about managing expectations.”

Will remembers being seven and overhearing the school psychologist tell Dad that Will was intelligent, sensitive, gifted, *special*. Dad never wanted a kid, much less a *special* kid. And then the psychologist told Dad that Will was so anti-social his teachers didn’t know what to do with him. No gifted education classes at his school for the kind of kid he was. Dad asking how this was his problem and what he should do about it. Psychologist saying Will would have trouble socializing but that he showed only an average tendency toward aggression. That it wasn’t a problem. That they were trying to do their best for Will. That Dad could expect him to do great things.

“‘Long as he can repair an engine, keep himself clean and fed, I don’t see what else there is to expect.”

Will had learned then to manage others’ expectations by maintaining a B average and keeping his difference to himself.

He never saw his father’s face while he talked with the psychologist, but Will knows the expression: glum with hidden anger and uncertainty. It’s similar to the expression on Jack’s face when he meets Jack in his office after he sees Mrs. Madchen out. Except Jack has determination Dad never had. And unlike Dad, Jack’s pretty good at telling him what to do.

“Managing your expectations?”

“Changing my expectations.”

And he’s talking about Miriam Lass. Will takes a certain amount of offense at the comparison but quails as Jack approaches and gets just a little too close.

“That lack of leadership, that was my responsibility.”

There’s that word. He’s his own responsibility. Always has been. Jack doesn’t need to be involved at all.

“You didn’t kill Miriam Lass. The Chesapeake Ripper did,” Will points out.

“It didn’t feel that way to me. I pulled her out of a classroom. Like I pulled you out of a classroom.”

Will shakes his head at the false analogy. He won’t rise to Jack’s level of agitation. He won’t.

“She was a student, I’m a teacher – ” he begins calmly.

“I’m still just as responsible for you as I was for her.”

“I’ll take my own responsibility,” Will interjects.

“Well, not from me you won’t. We can do it together. I broke the rules with Miriam, I encouraged her to break the rules, I am breaking the rules with you now – ”

“By letting an unstable agent do field work?”

“Special agent.”

That does it. Will turns his head and fights the impulse to hit Jack.

“That means you represent the FBI. You still represent me.”

After a day of feeling almost nothing, anger burns like a fire in his belly.

“Have I misrepresented you, Jack?”

“No, no, but you have me curious. Why are you still here when the both of us know that this is bad for you.”

“Do you want me to quit?” he asks testily.

“No. No, you had an opportunity to quit. You didn’t take it. Why not?”

Will is at a loss for words, his mouth moving as he tries to form thoughts into sentences. He wants to say what he said to Hannibal last week about needing to feel clean but Jack speaks first.

“Let me tell you what I think. I think the work you do here has created a sense of stability for you.”

Will nods, seeing where he’s going. Unstable. It always comes back to instability. He’s never had a solution to that problem aside from withdrawing from the world.

“Stability is good for you, Will.”

“Stability requires strong foundations, Jack,” he says as he removes his glasses. “My moorings are built on sand.”

“I’m not sand, I am bedrock,” Jack insists, and Will sees how badly Jack wants him to be stable, to be the old mug worn from everyday use. “When you doubt yourself, you don’t have to doubt me, too.”

Will nods and watches Jack turn and walk toward his desk. Dismissed.

Relief. He still has access to cases.

Will goes back to the lecture hall and sits and stares into space. He blinks and an hour has passed. Mrs. Madchen’s words ring in his head as he calls Dr. Sutcliffe to ask for more tests. Something is odd about Sutcliffe's tone when he says he has a late appointment open tonight.

Will detours past Hannibal’s house on his way to the Noble Hills. The lights are on. He’s probably having dinner. How easy it would be to turn into the driveway, ring the doorbell, and kiss Hannibal until there’s nothing but the solid fact of their bodies tangled together. Sleep tucked up next him where the volume of madness is turned down so low it sounds like someone’s left the radio on in the next room. The closest thing to quiet he knows.

An image of Hannibal cooking dinner the night of Will’s first day back in the field – Gideon’s copycat murder of the night nurse – rises like smoke before him.

“You worked too hard today, Will.”

Hannibal moves to Will’s side and runs his hand down to Will’s neck where he presses against tight, tense muscles.

“You don’t look well.”

He rubs his own rough hand against his neck, remembering the things Hannibal can do to soothe aching muscles. Missed his calling as a masseuse. Or a chef. Or almost anything.

Will’s mind remembers the nightmare he’d had when Hannibal made him go to bed. His body remembers Hannibal’s talented tongue. But though the memories are strong, his blood hardly stirs.

Will sighs. It’s just as well he didn’t stop. Can’t sleep. Can’t eat. Can’t feel. And now he can’t get it up.

Useless.

Psychotic depression. Another thing he and Georgia Madchen might have in common.

He remembers the weight of Hannibal’s hand on his chest as Hannibal slept next to him. He sees that calmness like the sea on a windless day.

A smooth sea never made a skillful sailor.

Will clings to that platitude as he parks and trudges into the health center for a second MRI.

Over an hour later, he's standing still in front of Sutcliffe whose face is sliced like Beth LeBeau's but with more force, more anger. Mechanically, he pulls his phone from his pocket and dials Jack.

"You need to come to Baltimore," he begins.

He hears himself tell Jack where he is and what happened, hears Jack's fear and worry and anger. He hangs up and sits on the couch. Stares at his reflection in the waxed floor and thinks about disappearing into nothingness. What a trick that would be.

He feels time pass in the hungry twist of his stomach, gurgling along with Sutcliffe's corpse as gasses escape. Footsteps come down the hall a few times, passing the cracked door twice before they belong to Jack and Katz and Zeller and Price.

Will says nothing as they enter the office and begin working. He doesn't look up. Doesn't need to see Jack weigh his options.

Katz comes close and begins to check him for evidence. He knows she's worried about him. He doesn't need to see her face either. He keeps his eyes on the waxed floor.

"You're clean," she says, trying to get him to meet her eyes. "You couldn't have done this without getting something on you and there's nothing on you."

She's so close. Too close.

"I don't feel clean," he says vacantly.

He hears Zeller and Price. Georgia Madchen's tissue in the murder weapon. No surprise.

He hears Hannibal in his head.

I killed someone… or, more accurately, I couldn't save someone, but it felt like killing him.

And Jack.

You didn't kill Miriam Lass. The Chesapeake Ripper did.

It didn't feel that way to me.

And himself.

How did you feel seeing Marissa Shuur impaled in his antler room?

Guilty.

Because you couldn't save her?

Because I felt like I killed her.

Now Sutcliffe in addition to Marissa Shuur. Because Georgia Madchen is following him.

“Why him?” Jack asks.

“She can’t see faces,” Will posits, “maybe she thought he was me.”

“All right,” Jack adds, and Will hears the skepticism, the questions he’s asking himself about Will, the doubts he has, his concern. “While we’re at it, why you?”

“I don’t know,” Will answers defensively as he stands. *She’s just like me. She knows it just as I do. We’re the same.* “I have a habit of collecting strays.”

He turns toward the door and turns back.

“I – I – I told her, the night I saw her, tried to tell her she was alive, maybe she heard me,” he says quickly. “Maybe that hadn’t occurred to her in a while.”

He turns again and leaves, slipping past the local cop interviewing the maintenance staff. No one comes after him.

Numbness stays with him as he drives home. Numbness pets the dogs. Numbness lifts the sweater over his head, unbuttons his shirt, slides his pants off. Numbness slowly drinks a glass of water and eats a bowl of cereal that tastes like cardboard. Numbness lies down in the dark and stares at the ceiling. Numbness dreams of conflagration and wakes basting in sweat to the sound of Ella’s growl.

Numbness raises his head slowly and pulls the sheet back and she’s there and he throws himself off the bed, adrenaline shooting life back into his veins. He stops, panting with fear, when he’s on hands and knees. Georgia’s looking at him with more fear than he feels.

“I see you, Georgia,” he says.

She finds his eyes. Or seems to. He stares at her, seeing himself there.

“Think of who you are.”

She’s alive. He’s alive. He feels it. So alive.

Will slowly creeps forward.

“It’s midnight. You’re in Wolf Trap, Virginia. Your name is Georgia Madchen.” He pants, his heart bursting in his chest, his body shaking with life. “You’re not alone. We are here together.”

Her eyes shift. She’s thinking. Wondering.

“Am I alive?” she asks.

And before he can answer, she reaches out to him. He mirrors her gesture until his middle finger touches hers. He sees life. Her life. His life. Feels life.

“Yes,” he answers.

He slides forward to take her hand. Her fingers curl around his. He offers a gentle squeeze and a smile.

“You’re sick,” he continues. “You probably know that. But I know how to help you. Will you let me help you, Georgia?”

Her face furrows. “I’m scared.”

“I’ll be here with you.” He squeezes her hand again. “Can I help you?”

She searches his face. At length, she nods.

“I have to reach up for the phone,” he says. “I need to make a call. I’m going to do that now.”

He pushes himself up, still holding her hand, and reaches for the phone on the bedside table.

He keeps his eyes on hers as he dials Jack.

“Will?”

“Georgia Madchen is here with me in my house,” he says calmly. “She’s alive. She’s okay. So am I. I’ll see you when you get here. Come in quiet. I’m going to hang up now.”

He does and puts the phone down.

“Can I stay here with you, Georgia, until my friend arrives?”

She searches his face again and he realizes it’s his voice and his posture she’s searching, not his face. She’s looking for signs she can trust.

She nods.

“I’m going to curl up on my side, okay?” he says.

She searches again. Nods again. Will slides his body over so he’s more comfortable. He can smell how ill she is but it’s a distant sensation. Nothing can distract him from the depths of her eyes. Here’s someone coming out of delusion. Here’s someone so beyond hope her own mother thought she was dead. Here’s someone remembering who she is. Here’s hope.

Will lies on the floor next to her until he hears the crunch of tires on gravel. She hears it, too. Tenses like a startled rabbit.

“Georgia,” Will says. She looks back at him. “That’s my friend. We’re going to help you. It might be frightening, but you have nothing to be afraid of. I have to get up to open the door. You can stay here.”

He keeps his eyes on hers as long as he can, sliding backward and pushing himself up with his arms. He walks slowly to the door, turns on the porch light, opens it, and waves them in.

Will turns back to the bed, walking slowly, hoping to coax her out when he sees that she's slid out herself and is trying to get to her feet to run. He pulls her up and holds her securely.

"Georgia, it's okay," he says as she fights him. "You're okay. Calm down."

But the flashlights of Jack, the local PD, and the EMTs make her fight to get free so she can run. Will speaks calmly to her as he holds her with strength he didn't think he had, keeping everyone away with his intense stare until an EMT approaches with a syringe. Will helps him lay her down on the floor as she relaxes.

He stays next to her as the EMTs go for a gurney and Jack asks him what the hell happened.

"I was asleep," Will answers. "One of my dogs growled. Woke me up. She was under the bed. She's… she knows who she is, Jack. She was calm with me until everyone came in."

He watches as she's lifted onto the gurney.

"What did she say?" Jack asks.

"She asked if she was alive," Will answers. "Said she was scared. That was it. I didn't try to talk to her."

Jack looks from Will to Georgia. Sees plenty of connections. Knows why she matters to Will.

"I see breaking and entering. We'll collect evidence." He nods to two of the officers. "You and I can sit down and talk."

Will nods once and leads Jack to the kitchen. He thinks about offering Jack coffee but he doesn't want to make any.

"Any idea how she got in?" Jack asks as he settles into a chair.

Will shakes his head. "Can't believe she got past the dogs. No idea how she did that."

"And she wasn't violent toward you?"

"No. She's sick."

"So she came to you because, what, she trusts you?"

Will nods.

"Doesn't explain why she killed Sutcliffe. If she thought he was you, why would she try to kill you there but not here?"

Will sighs. "She's had more brain scans, dealt with more doctors than she can remember," he says. "A lot of it can't have been pleasant. Maybe she could tell the difference. Maybe she thought he was hurting me." He shakes his head. "I don't know."

Winston snuffles near Jack's hand. Jack smiles wryly and pets the top of Winston's head.

“Stick to collecting stray dogs, Will.”

Will sniffs.

Jack gets to his feet. “Take the day off. You look tired.”

Will nods and glances out the window as the ambulance pulls out of his driveway. Jack leaves. Will watches with distant interest as one of the officers checks the back door for tissue. He gives his statement. Tsks at the dogs when they forget their discipline. Pours himself a glass of whiskey and drinks slowly as he hears the officers discern her mode of entry.

They can’t explain how she got past the dogs. Will speculates to himself that she was in his car, probably lying down in the back where he wouldn’t notice her. He rubs his throbbing head and tells them to check his car, wishing they would go away so he can be alone but knowing the holes have to be filled in with evidence. She must have gotten in his car while he and Katz looked for evidence in Beth LeBeau’s bedroom. Then to Baltimore for the MRI. How he didn’t notice the smell is beyond him.

But several things about this case are beyond him. He needs to sleep. Needs at the very least to rest.

He can do that now, he thinks. She’s safe. He helped her. As guilty as he feels for leading her to Sutcliffe, he feels cleansed of that guilt for helping her find her way back to herself. A smile works its way to his lips. It feels like the warmth of the morning sun.

All he needs is work. He can’t be stable doing it but he can get closer to stability like this than he can any other way. Not with Alana. Not with Hannibal. Just work.

Local PD doesn’t leave his house until nearly 5 a.m. Will feeds the dogs so they won’t disturb him and falls exhausted into bed.

He dreams of himself and Georgia, not the half-dead person hiding under his bed but the young woman smiling in the photo, walking the fields at dusk in summer. A million fireflies dance around them. They stop and sit in the grass and look at Will’s house, all lit up, a boat on the sea. A thunderstorm gathers in the distance. It won’t come in their direction. It’s passing north. Lightning flashes behind the clouds like the mythological gods hurling insults. Powerful but removed. The grass rustles in the wind; the air smells of cleansing rain. Will holds her hand and feels safe. Like she’s the sister he never had.

They belong here. Here and nowhere else.

I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds

Chapter Summary

Fever pushes Will further down the rabbit hole. Rôti 1 / 3.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient! Work ate my life, and this chapter was very hard to write. I hope the next one doesn't take nearly as long to appear.

“It’s 2:20 a.m. I’m in Wolf Trap, Virginia. My name is Will Graham.”

Will mumbles the words to himself as he runs a fingertip around the rim of a mug of chamomile tea. Whorls of tea stain the water; the waft of steam mesmerizes him.

Water has so many forms. Glaciers. Lakes. Rivers. Oceans. Streams. Springs. Geysers. Rain.

The last time he dreamt about water, it was the Appalachian trout stream and the Mississippi River near Greenville. This time it’s Tygart Lake, West Virginia. Melting glaciers. Enormous waves. Drowning in global warming.

But no, not drowning. Not freezing or boiling, either. This time he’s crushed by the waves. This time he’s steaming and melting.

Will sips the tea and rubs his forehead, dry for the first time all night because he just got out of a shivery shower. Waking up four times drenched and breathless is too many for 2:30 in the morning. Three by this time and it’s a very bad night.

Fever dreams. Dreams within dreams within dreams. Layers of reality. Layers of perception.

Only Hannibal’s orientation exercise and the fact that he feels like shit let him know with a high degree of certainty that he’s in his house drinking tea at 2:30 in the morning. But after waking up with Beth LeBeau’s blood on his hands, nothing is truly certain.

Steam from this tea reminds him of tea he’s shared with Hannibal. Those Japanese pots with the herons on the lids and the small cup that’s heftier than it looks. Hannibal’s strategic use of tea to soothe him when he’s upset. Because on some level, Hannibal loves him. Whatever that means.

I’m your friend, Will. I care about your life.

Hannibal offers a towline, a rudder: safety, control.

Steam from the tea merges in Will's mind with steam from the hot tub. Warmth relaxing his muscles. Hannibal's bruised body.

Gouging Hannibal's eyes out with his thumbs whispering shh shh shh

Will shuts his eyes tightly. When he opens them again, the kitchen table and mug of tea greet him as though nothing is amiss. He lifts the mug with shaking hands and drinks.

It's been nearly two weeks since he's seen Hannibal outside the office. Not that Hannibal hasn't offered. Will knows he has a standing invitation at Hannibal's house. But he's felt too strange. Too different. Too much like someone else.

Headache. Stress from work. Tiredness. Not sleeping well. The excuses come easily.

"Then you should rest, Will."

Several times now he's seen that subtle change in Hannibal's expression that says *come with me and I'll make you feel better*. How true it is. His achy muscles miss Hannibal's hands. Nothing tastes good; he's had to make himself eat. Hannibal would cook something he'd want. Awaken his other appetites, too. But he can't be very tempted when he's so unsure about himself.

Will sighs. All he wants to do is sleep this off like it's a hangover and get back to that good thing he had before his mind began to betray him.

He finishes the tea, fills the mug with water, and drinks all of it. The aspirin he took before his shower will kick in soon. He'll sleep for a while and then dream again. He wants to give up on sleep – the dreams, god, they're terrifying – but it's too early and he's too exhausted.

Will removes the sheets from the bed and puts them in the washing machine along with the towels and clothes he's sweated through tonight. He tucks neat hospital corners even though he knows he'll kick them out within the hour. He's uncomfortably warm when he lies down.

His dream is less a dream than a memory. He's twelve. New town, new school. It happens for the first time in pre-algebra. He notices a bruise on Grayson Foote's cheekbone. Grayson is similar to him: bad home life, natural sensitivity to others, inability and growing unwillingness to live up to the rigid expectations for boys their age in Mississippi. He doesn't want to hurt Grayson. But he sees the bruise and before he understands what's happening, he sees Grayson bracing himself and *he swings his fist directly at Grayson's cheek wanting to teach him his place wanting to show him who the man of the house is wanting to kick his scrawny ass for being such a sissy and a weirdo and a freak and a goddamn disappointment.*

Shocked by the association, Will stares at his desk while his heart races and his head pounds and his mouth tastes like he's been sucking on a penny.

He can't move. Not when the bell rings. Not when the teacher tells him he has to leave. Not when she calls his name. She gets another teacher and for some reason that makes a

difference. Will follows them to the principal's office. He sits in the anteroom with the secretary. Can't move. Can't speak. All he can think is that his mind is broken.

He's led to a car and taken to the hospital. He hears the phrase "psych ward" for the first time and finds himself sitting on a hospital bed with someone's large hands roughly removing his clothes.

Everything is wrong. But he can't change it. All he can do is stare as different people talk to him.

He lies motionless on the hospital bed as night comes and goes. Small and scared, he's aware only that something he doesn't understand is happening to him.

The dream skips and he's twenty-three and he walks behind everyone else toward a low brick building in the Ninth Ward where a man has just shot his wife in the head. He absorbs the evidence: the crumpled body, the bits of brain and skull stuck in the splatter pattern on the wall, the entry and exit wounds, the overturned furniture, and sudden he's *marching to the door with the gun tucked into the back of his pants and the goal of getting her to cooperate with him because he doesn't really want to hurt her she just has to do what he says and if he doesn't she has to know there will be consequences.*

She throws a lamp at him. It shatters at his back. Uppity bitch. He backhands her and she tries to kick him in the junk and he pulls the gun out and without thinking he pulls the trigger.

Crime of passion. Obvious. He takes slow, steady, deliberate breaths as he's done since he was twelve. No one can know what's happening inside his head.

Except someone does know. Chilton knows.

"The things you see, Mr. Graham. How long before they're not in your head anymore. How long before you wake up killing? How long before you do more than that? Before you go after Dr. Bloom? She's a piece of work, isn't she? Still," Chilton purses his lips licentiously, "I'd be all over that in a second."

Will flies across the desk to strangle Chilton. Chilton dodges him and lands a blow on his kidney. Will careens into the bookshelves, absorbs the shock, and pushes himself off and toward Chilton. With raw strength and determination he drives Chilton against the wall and aims a punch at Chilton's throat. Will steps aside when Chilton falls gasping to his knees. Slowly, Chilton manages to get onto all fours and look up.

Big eyes full of fear. Because Chilton knows who Will is and what he's capable of. Chilton knows how this ends.

Will kicks Chilton's chest. Chilton sprawls onto his back. Will straddles him and ignores the clumsy arms batting at him. Just presses his thumbs against the bone of Chilton's forehead and sweeps down into eye sockets shh shh shh and gouges and feels effervescent with power –

Will launches himself off the bed like the sheets are on fire. He stumbles across the room and into a kitchen chair, breathing so hard he can hear himself wheezing. He puts his head down on his sweaty arms and inhales furniture polish and hears the dogs' toenails click on the hardwood floor and thinks of where he is and when and who.

Will Graham. Wolf Trap, Virginia. Early morning.

A few minutes pass before fear recedes to a manageable level and he can lift his head and see the dogs in the cobalt light.

Will checks his watch.

"It's 6:43 a.m. I'm in Wolf Trap, Virginia. My name is Will Graham. You're all staring at me."

Seven pairs of eyes. Will pats his leg to call them over. Winston, Ella, Horace, and Jackson approach and cautiously sniff him.

Will closes his eyes and drops a hand on Jackson's enormous head. Even the dogs know something's wrong.

Later, when the coffee pot starts melting, all Will can think about is the stag melting into tar on the other side of the trout stream, of himself melting in the Mississippi River. Boiling and then liquefying. Washed into the lake by waves that belong in the ocean.

Will turns to the nearest bottle of aspirin. His heart slows once he swallows two pills. Placebo effect. Emphasis on *effect*, he thinks as he abandons coffee for the shower. If he hadn't just had a day off, he'd consider calling in. Despite having spent the better part of twelve hours in bed, he's still tired and feels, there's no other word for it, awful.

As he soaps his skin, Will groans inwardly and hopes he isn't getting the flu. Katz mentioned it was going around. He remembers intending to get a flu shot but never getting around to it. Dammit.

Gas station coffee and the donut he chokes down perk him up enough that he's mostly awake by the time he stands in the snow looking at the transport vehicle's open doors swarmed by Baltimore PD.

Abel Gideon. Chilton.

A shiver runs down his spine.

He should be afraid of diving into the still place inside after Beth LeBeau. He is. But fear seems distant. Maybe it's the light reflecting from the snow. Maybe it's the buzz just kicking in from the second cup of coffee he had a few minutes ago. Maybe it's because everyone knows who did it: there's no chance it could be him.

Gouging Chilton's eyes like he gouged the night nurse's

Fear tastes like a greasy donut. Will picks fear up like it's a tether and dives. His heart beats the same steady 72 that Gideon's beat as he pulled the fork tine out of his palm.

A security guard and an orderly. His hands cuffed but feet free. It's so easy. He smiles.

"All I need is one hand free," he says. His smile turns maniacal and he drives his thumb down on the bench until it separates with a crunch.

Immediately it's the barroom brawl he knows so well. He takes a punch, slips his hands free, shoves the guard aside, and punches the orderly only to be elbowed in the nose by the guard and pushed onto the floor. He kicks the orderly back as the guard tries to strangle him, then shoves the guard off of him and rises to face the orderly, wrapping the chain of the handcuffs around his neck. He slashes with the other handcuff at the guard and the orderly throws him against the wall of the vehicle. The orderly hits him and wrestles him onto the floor while the guard tries to grab his feet. He tightens the chain around the orderly's neck and, with his foot on the guard's neck, slams the guard's head into the top of the vehicle once, twice, three times with deadly strength. He rolls the orderly over, straddles him, and fights to slit his throat with the open ends of the handcuffs.

Arterial spray. Bright exhilaration of killing. Time distortion. Hyperclarity.

When the driver hits the breaks and slams him against the wall, he doesn't feel it. He leaps up, flexes his knees, and spreads his arms, ready to attack the driver.

When Will opens his eyes, everything throbs.

The crime of opportunity in the van doesn't square with the organs hanging in the trees or the mutilation of the corpses: Abel Gideon doesn't know who he is. He thinks the Ripper does. For whom else would he leave this little gift?

"Chilton got off lightly," Will says to Jack.

Jack looks at him, reading his motives. "You want to interview him, interview him. I want Dr. Bloom there, too."

Will nods and Jack leaves and suddenly the world tilts and he has to think of every muscle in his body flexing to keep himself upright. It's not so different from his mind's assault on his morals. He breathes through it, then gets to his car and sits. Eventually, with the help of another coffee, wooziness dissipates like morning fog.

There stands Chilton. Chilton and his psychic driving. Pushing Gideon to kill by telling him a story about himself so many times Gideon can't remember who he is.

Will's stomach burns. He fumbles in the center console for a roll of Tums.

Chilton. One day he's not going to be able to stop himself from punching Chilton. And he's not going to stop after just one punch.

Will takes a deep breath. Not today.

But something inside him pushes back. He wonders if he'll feel powerful then. If that's what the part of him that liked killing Hobbs wants.

Hobbs whispers into his ear, *It would be so easy.*

Will bristles, heart thumping. He exhales forcefully and takes the next exit. Coke, Tums. He plucks a protein bar from a shelf without noticing which flavor he chooses, then stares at a package of Marlborough Reds behind the clerk's shoulder as he pays.

Everything feels like it's coming to an end. Like he's set down a path and he can't turn back. Words he's thought about often in his career flit into his mind.

Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.

Words from the *Bhagavad Gita* that came in similar fashion to Robert J. Oppenheimer's mind upon the first successful atom bomb test. Though lacking in scale, homicide is no less dramatic. Lately he's felt even more like death. Being around Georgia Madchen did that. Waiting with her on the floor, he felt her sense of awakening from death. Her terror. That rush of falling, always falling.

Back in the car, Will tells himself he's not having a breakdown. He's not. He's just… whatever's wrong with him… he's sick and he can get better. He will get better.

"It's good of you to be here," Alana says as they sign for their visitors badges. "Can't be easy."

Will nods and finds a potted plant to study. Classic Will Graham move.

Alana kicks that thought down. She permits herself to note his typical gestures as his friend. But that's all she's permitted.

Still, it's hard to ignore how tired he looks. How haunted.

Hard to ignore and even harder not to speculate why.

It's almost a relief, then, to have to argue with Chilton over who did what to Gideon. She's only sorry she lets her temper get away from her and Will has to step in to stop her from saying too much. She's better than that. Better than Chilton.

"Don't let him get to you," Will says quietly as they're buzzed out of the last security checkpoint.

Alana sets her jaw. "Hard not to."

Will concedes with a crooked smile. "For what it's worth, I don't think you did anything wrong."

He turns abruptly and makes for the exit.

“Thanks,” she calls out after him.

Will raises a hand in acknowledgement.

Strange.

Alana fights all day not to analyze that moment.

As he drives to Quantico, Will is assaulted by competing images of himself kissing Alana and gouging Chilton’s eyes out. Twenty minutes out of the gate, he pulls onto the shoulder and stares at nothing while everything inside him churns. He’s nearly late for the briefing about the manhunt for Gideon.

He settles in at the back of the room and listens to Jack. Gideon must be caught, of course, but Will admits to considerable sympathy for him. How easy it is to sympathize with a killer. The sensation of falling returns. He takes a breath, then everything is extremely loud and incredibly close. Grotesque antlers surround him as his thoughts take unusually vivid form. He knows this one isn't happening, knows it's a hallucination, but hearing the truths he fears cancels out all of the noise in the signal, and for a terrifying moment of free fall, he knows Jack will catch him.

What kind of crazy are you?! Jack yells from across the room.

Will hears himself breathing like a madman approaching his quarry: harsh yet deliberate. He will kill again.

Only coffee and solitude get him through the afternoon. He studies every report he can get his hands on. The procedure comforts him. Gideon will target the people he blames for the nurse’s murder.

Rightly so.

Is that his thought or Hobbs’?

Will glances numbly at the page in front of him, no longer sure he can tell the difference.

Hannibal checks his watch. 7:03 p.m. Only once has Will been late without calling first.

Hannibal waits another minute before he gets to his feet and opens the door to the waiting room.

Will Graham sits in one of the chairs staring into space.

“Will?”

Will turns his head when his name is called. He blinks and returns to an exhausted, haunted version of himself. Once inside the office, Will settles quickly into a chair and fixes his gaze just over Hannibal’s left shoulder.

“Something happened today,” Hannibal observes. “Tell me about it.”

“Abel Gideon escaped from a transport van.”

Hannibal waits for him to continue. He doesn’t. A shaky breath rattles in his chest.

Fear radiates from him at the temperature of roasting grey matter.

“Something else happened,” Hannibal prompts.

“I had a…” Will taps the chair’s arm nervously, “…a hallucination today. In the middle of the briefing about the manhunt.”

Will presses his fingers against his eyes as though he’s trying to banish the vision. Fear and desperation crowd out every other aspect of his being.

“What did you see?”

“A thicket of antlers,” Will begins. “All I heard was my heart… dim… bu-but fast… like, um… footsteps fleeing into silence.”

Will looks just to the left of Hannibal’s eyes. “I don’t know how to gauge who I am any more.”

True desperation indeed.

Will pulls in a deep breath and looks down. “I don’t feel like myself. I feel like I’ve been gradually becoming different for a while.”

Hannibal watches, fascinated. He has never seen someone break so completely before. Not even in the moment before death.

Eyes on the floor, Will adds in a half-frantic, half-resigned tone, “I just feel like somebody else.”

“What do you feel like?” Hannibal asks, mesmerized.

Anguish twists Will’s face. His chin shakes as he forms the words.

“I feel crazy.”

Terrified breaths. Pure fear.

“That is what you fear most.”

Will shakes his head, lower lip trembling.

“I fear not knowing who I am.”

And there it is, at last: the moment of breaking.

It's fitting. A fever brought them together as intimate partners. Now a fever strips Will to his barest elements. It's one of the purest expressions of humanity Hannibal has ever seen.

Will trembles, looking from side to side, tears brimming in his eyes. "That's what Abel Gideon's afraid of, isn't it? He's like a blind man. Somebody got inside his head and… moved all the furniture around."

"I imagine Abel Gideon would want to find the Chesapeake Ripper to gauge who he is. And who he isn't."

Hannibal pauses and tries to catch Will's eye.

"Will. You have me as your gauge."

Will nods, tears waiting to spill, most of him somewhere else: seeking shelter from the pain of this moment. No forts in his mind for the things he loves.

"We haven't… we haven't, ah… talked about what you think this is." Will swallows nervously.

Hannibal waits, wanting to hear Will specify.

Will gestures with his hand as if calling a thought to mind. "Now that… the MRI… has shown…" He stops and doesn't resume, eyes fixed on the floor.

Hannibal tilts his head. "It could be a number of things. Stress from the work you do has probably compounded it. It's hard to separate the symptoms of stress from the symptoms of something else."

Will's gaze shifts to the fire on the other side of the room. His mouth crinkles.

"You have every reason to be stressed," Hannibal says soothingly as he sits forward in the chair. "Since I've known you, you've endured more trauma than most people face over several years, if ever. Garret Jacob Hobbs. Being shot. Every killer you imagine. Your mind needs rest."

Will shakes his head angrily. "I c-c-can't."

He cuffs his eyes. Hannibal doesn't offer him a tissue.

"Then what can you do?" Hannibal beseeches. "You feel like you have no control. You worry you don't know who you are. But you do. What's more, you can act."

Anger flashes through the pain in Will's eyes. "I'm not quitting."

"What about rest?" Hannibal asks.

"I'm not taking a break," Will growls.

Hannibal inclines his head in grudging acknowledgement.

“You haven’t been sleeping well,” Hannibal observes. “Or eating enough.”

Will nods slightly. “I know,” he breathes.

“I know you know,” Hannibal answers. “What can you do about it?”

Will closes his eyes. “Not much.”

Hannibal tilts his head invitingly. He waits for Will to open his eyes and get the message.

Will sighs and looks away. “Ah… I haven’t, ah… been feeling well lately…”

He trails off and studies the fireplace.

Hannibal issues a slight sigh of disappointment that says *let me help*.

Will blinks rapidly. A breath hitches in his chest. “It’s just… I don’t… I don’t know what I might do….”

Hannibal watches twin tears break free and run down Will’s cheeks. Hannibal doesn't breathe so that nothing will interfere with his appreciation of this moment. Will cannot know how beautiful he is.

“I don’t believe you would hurt me, Will.”

Will stares at the fire, blinking through the tears. He swallows twice before he attempts to speak. When he does, the best he can do is form the words around a gusty exhale.

“You don’t know that.”

Will folds his hands in his lap and looks down at them. Tears splash on corduroys.

“It’s my risk to take,” Hannibal responds quietly.

Will stares at his hands until the tears stop and his breathing evens out. At length, he gives a small nod.

Half an hour later, Hannibal says nothing as Will joins him in removing winter wear in the foyer. Will needs to feel free of influence for a while now that he’s given in to something that made him so uncomfortable.

Will dozes while Hannibal reheats a soup of wild game birds for Will and makes something considerably more elaborate for himself. He gently wakes Will for dinner. The bottle of aspirin rattles; footsteps shuffle toward the dining room.

Will sips the soup slowly, playing with it more than eating it.

“I guess I should ask how you’ve been…?” Will mumbles.

Hannibal’s eyebrow leaps up. “Why should you ask that?”

Will shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t know how to do this.”

“You think you should abide by a convention you do not respect merely because it’s conventional to do so?”

Will’s mouth quirks. “Well, when you put it that way.”

Hannibal smiles. He’s rewarded for his tenacity when some of the tension drains from Will’s body and Will begins to taste what he’s been eating. This fondness he has for Will…

Well, he can be fond as he builds Will back up. Just as long as Will knows where he must turn when his need is greatest. It’s been a triumph to draw this hermit from his sanctuary. Now he can be fledged, and soon he will take flight. His apotheosis beckons. Even he sees it now.

After dinner, Will drags himself to the bedroom without prompting. Hannibal gathers towels, a basin, and water. He will sleep when Will sleeps and wake when Will wakes. He will ease Will through the terrors of this night. Always then will his fledgling raptor return to him.

Hannibal lies down next to Will, rests his fist over Will’s heart, and counts its frantic beats while he waits for Will’s terrified awakening.

Digging Holes in Water

Chapter Summary

Will finds the edge. Hannibal pushes him over.

I wish that you would move to the sun
cause you're like diggin' holes in thin air
and we know that can't be done
I wish that you would cheat with someone
cause you're like diggin' holes in water
and we know that can't be done

- Ugly Casanova, "Diggin' Holes in Water"

"Urgent call?"

Will nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of Hannibal's voice. He drops the laces of his right shoe and tries not to turn bright red as he glances over his shoulder.

"No, ah…"

"Then you have time for a cup of coffee."

Hannibal sweeps back into the kitchen before Will can answer. Will blows out a breath and feels like a heel as he slumps toward the kitchen. He stops just inside its bounds like an animal suspicious of the room.

"I thought you might sleep longer," Will ventures. "I mean, I didn't want to wake you up."

"You didn't stand much chance," Hannibal answers jovially as he sets up the French press. "I'm a light sleeper."

Will nods. When Hannibal gestures toward the arm chair, Will shuffles to it without question. He should thank Hannibal for all he did last night, but the words won't come. Instead, a blur of memories and dreams makes him feel again the shivers of a cool cloth against his hot skin, the salve of water to his parched throat, the comfort of Hannibal's calming presence.

He thinks about clenching his fists against the bludgeon to his pride this whole thing has been, but the thought of fists brings the assault of his dreams. Will blinks at the images – *gouging, slashing, twisting, cutting, ripping* – and tries to keep his focus on Hannibal.

Hannibal moves calmly, unaware of Will's distress. He starts the coffee. Pulls ingredients out of the refrigerator for breakfast. Shrimp and grits. One of Will's favorites.

Hannibal can't know how many times Will dreamt of gouging his eyes out last night.

Will takes a deep breath, trying to steady himself against the smells, tastes, and textures of running his hot fingers over Hannibal's sweaty skin, thumbs to forehead, then sweeping down and *pressing*.

Not real. Not real. Not real.

The thoughts come easily because this time he's sure the wave of sensations isn't real. He knows because he's watching Hannibal make breakfast and beneath the fear, anger, and sickness, he feels a strange new sensation that might be near-unconditional trust. Accustomed to having no moorings, no towline, no anchor, Will isn't sure yet what to think about this sense or how he might use it, but mostly it's felt good. Really good. Good enough to make him wary, and wary he's been. However, that feeling means he's awake and aware; he's never felt it and woken up in some other place. Since he feels it now, he knows these are memories and he isn't hallucinating or losing time or doing God knows what else.

Even as he feels himself straddling Hannibal's chest, pinning his arms, and *gouging – so little resistance those orbs offer, so easy to press between the bones and into the brain –* even as he feels it, it's not as bad as it could be.

But these are just memories of dreams heightened by the fever he hasn't gotten rid of. What else will it heighten?

Will shudders at the thought. Hannibal, terrified and dying as blood wells in his eye sockets and spills over, shifts suddenly to placid, alive Hannibal, stirring the pan while he glances at *The New York Times*.

Will relaxes. Breathes.

Then Hannibal flickers and Garrett Jacob Hobbs is breaking eggs over a pan while Abigail sets the table. Except it's not Hobbs but Will himself. He smiles at Abigail and she smiles back. It's a bright fall morning; they'll go on a hike after breakfast to check the deer signs.

Will blinks and they're in his kitchen with the dogs waiting patiently nearby for a scrap of bacon. Abigail's smiling at him. Hannibal's at the stove, also smiling. Will shows Abigail how to fillet the trout she caught this morning. A sense that this life could be his overwhelms him.

For a moment, everything is radiant.

But as quickly as that sense of buoyant happiness comes, it drops into free fall and he's pressing his nose against Abigail's cheek, holding her tightly while she struggles, telling her it will be over soon.

The arterial spray is a perfect crimson arc in the afternoon sunlight.

Will blinks. Hannibal's watching him from behind the stove. Will can't hear over the roar of his blood. He looks at Hannibal's shoulder while he calms down so he can watch Hannibal watch him. At length, Hannibal's expression turns mildly chastising and vaguely disappointed: *I won't tell you what I think you should do because you already know: take the day off. Rest.*

As though he could.

Hannibal says nothing as he brings Will a cup of coffee, which Will accepts gratefully. It's so superior to the gas station brew he would have picked up that they're not even the same drink. Still, he hadn't wanted to hang around this morning. Not when he feels like he's coming inexorably to an end.

The end.

That's what it is: the end. He doesn't want to think about it – that whatever's wrong with him, it's terminal. Not because it would kill him physically but because he'd be dead in every other meaningful sense.

Jack yells between the antlers, "You will kill again!" – Will fights because *not real isn't happening* – but if that's where this going, maybe it wouldn't be so bad if –

The sound of movement nearby brings him back to Hannibal's kitchen and breakfast. Will stands and joins him at the table before his mind can trick him again. Hannibal doesn't have a questioning expression for Will. So, he lost time and Hannibal didn't notice, Will thinks as he spoons food into his mouth. Son of a bitch.

Jack accuses across antlers, "Institutionalized at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Armed and dangerous. Armed and extremely dangerous."

Will breathes through the intrusion, manages to chew even.

"What do you think's wrong with me?" Will mumbles.

"Fever by itself is non-specific," Hannibal answers. "It's the body fighting to protect itself." Hannibal pauses and looks Will in the eye. "Could be stress."

Will sniffs. "You think everything's stress."

Hannibal's mouth quirks. "You have a great deal of stress in your life. It manifests in several ways, including an increase in body temperature." Hannibal shrugs. "Or it could be the flu." He tilts his head. "Still no sore throat or muscle aches?"

Will shakes his head.

Hannibal shrugs again and Will gets the message: stress.

Go home, Will. Take the day off.

But Hannibal doesn't understand that he can't stop. Not right now. Not today.

Will wants to think about something else – anything else. Sex suggests itself. His body responds to the quick rush of endorphins accompanying a panoply of images – all the things he wants to do to Hannibal. It's been so long. Desire hums in his blood.

No, wrong, can't do this. Won't.

Will concentrates on the food instead. He can pick all of the spices out now. He lists them to himself and the longing in the pit of his stomach recedes.

When Hannibal sees Will out, he places a hand softly on Will's back. Will doesn't meet his eyes.

Alana doesn't expect to see Will fight the stream of cadets leaving her 11 a.m. class. He can be here for one reason only.

"Are you my protective custody?" she asks.

"You heard," Will says, stopping where the stadium seats begin. Distant.

"I heard I get an armed escort until Gideon's apprehended," Alana answers as she packs her bag.

"You'll have a real FBI agent, not a teacher with a temporary badge." Will chews distastefully through the words.

"Too bad," Alana teases. "It would have been fun to cozy up with your dogs in front of a space heater."

"You don't need protective custody to cozy up with my dogs," Will begins seriously, "or me for that matter."

His seriousness is odd. It makes her look more closely. She notices his pallor – it's pronounced, and not just because he's wearing a dark shirt.

"I just need a little more, um…"

Alana rounds the desk and approaches Will as he struggles to complete his sentence.

"…stability on my part."

Even more than a foot away, he radiates heat like someone who's spent hours in the sun. Alana keeps hold of concern and doesn't let anything else in as she places a palm against the scratchy surface of his cheek. Conflicting emotions flicker in his eyes – confusion, hope, desire, fear. She tries to stay clinical.

"You're really warm," she hears herself observe.

Will's eyes follow her hand as it slips from his cheek and she sees more longing than he means to show. Will flees, taking a step around her with some throw-away comment about running hot.

Will stops at the desk. "Ah, they say stress raises body temperature," he says, inflecting it as a half-question.

Alana's first thought is how stubbornly, stupidly male he's being – denying that he's sick even when it's obvious. Her brothers did that.

"Maybe you should take an aspirin," she suggests.

Will rattles the bottle at her without turning his attention from the paperweight he's examining. The same paperweight that's been on that desk since she started teaching here. Not exactly an object of interest.

"Way ahead of you," Will says as he puts the bottle back in his pocket.

Well. Friends don't push hard. And she has other concerns. Concerns that kept her awake most of last night.

"They're gonna kill Gideon, aren't they?"

Will looks up. He's suddenly protective again, very much like her big brother.

"Whatever happens to him," Will begins intently, "has nothing to do with you."

And just like her big brother, he doesn't quite understand her perspective.

"Gideon can't be completely responsible for his actions if he was subjected to an outside influence," Alana responds.

"Like, ah, Chilton telling him he's the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"Like me," Alana corrects with a burdened breath, "telling him he's not in a state of mind to know who he is."

"Well," Will says as he leans against the desk, "he's gonna want someone to tell him who he is and I think he'll be looking for the Ripper to do that."

Alana joins him in leaning against the desk. If he's like a brother, she can be platonically close.

"What do you think will happen if Gideon finds the Chesapeake Ripper?" she asks.

"The Chesapeake Ripper'll kill him," Will answers. "He took credit for his work. The Ripper would consider that… rude."

Alana takes a deep breath that could be mistaken for a sigh. As she pushes off from the desk, she says, "Then I hope you find him first."

Will stands also and watches her finish packing her briefcase. “Me, too,” he adds.

He looks like he wants to say more when movement catches both of their eyes. A tall, dark-haired, middle-aged man with few distinguishing features approaches them.

“Dr. Alana Bloom?” he asks.

“Yes?”

“I’m Agent David Kinz,” he says as he extends a hand. She shakes it. “I’ve been assigned as your protective custody until Abel Gideon is no longer at large.”

“The cavalry has arrived,” Will says with an unreadable glance at Kinz.

Will offers her a crooked smile and walks away. In his posture, Alana reads well-disguised defeat.

By the time the second Columbian neck tie appears, only inertia and grit get Will from place to place and moment to moment. All he knows is that if he stops working, everything he’s seen today will catch up with him. He dreads the moment when he closes his eyes and sees the screams. Wants desperately to avoid it as long as he can.

Dr. Carson Nahn. Ripper kill. The details are all there: the brutality indicative not of Abel Gideon but of the man he was made to think he was. Even when Gideon killed Nurse Shell, the kill lacked the passion and dedication of the Ripper.

It’s so obvious to him that he thinks he mishears when someone suggests otherwise. The arm is equally obvious.

“Where’s the last place you saw a severed arm, Jack?” Will asks.

Realization dawns in Jack’s eyes. When Jack gives him the *you’re with me* look, inertia sweeps Will forward again toward the parking garage.

As is his custom, Will falls asleep as soon as Jack gets on the Interstate. Just as well, Jack thinks. Will looks like he needs it.

An hour and a dozen terse exchanges on the phone later, Jack hears Will stir. Good timing. They’re ten minutes out.

Maybe it’s because Jack hasn’t looked at him in an hour, maybe it’s because he looks much worse than he did back at Quantico – either way, Will looks awful. And that’s really saying something, Jack muses: he’s seen Will look a dozen different kinds of terrible, but never as bad as he looks now.

“I want you to wait outside,” Jack instructs.

Will takes a moment to answer. “That’s probably best.”

His voice is small and exhausted. Jack grips the steering wheel tightly.

“You look like hell, Will.”

“I feel like hell,” Will answers, staring off into the distance through the passenger’s window. “Actually,” Will corrects, “I feel, uh, fluid. Like I’m…spilling.”

Jack looks over at him.

“Must have come down with something,” Will says as he rubs his eyes. “I hope it’s not contagious.”

“This work that we do,” Jack coaches, “It will compromise your immune system – *if* you allow it. You’ve gotta keep things in perspective. You gotta keep yourself in perspective.”

It’s the only thing that’s allowed him to stay around as long as he has. Will would do well to follow the advice.

Instead, Will says, “Ah, myself is a little hazy at the moment.”

Jack’s jaw clenches. “You gotta start taking better care of yourself.”

“Build my resistance,” Will says.

“You just can’t take it all in,” Jack adds vehemently. “You’ve got to let go of as much of it as you can. You just gotta let go.”

Will breathes shakily; his eyelids droop.

“It’s hard to shake off something that’s already under your skin.”

The words come out tortured. Will goes quiet, eyes closed again as though he’s used up all his strength.

For the first time, Jack regrets bringing Will to a crime scene.

When Will turns left off the path and follows the stag, it’s like stepping back into his skin again. Everything fits. Everything makes sense. He realizes only now that he’s missed the creature. Maybe even worried about it a little. Because everything feels right. For the first time since West Virginia, everything just feels right.

As soon as Will sees the station wagon, he knows it’s Gideon’s. Gideon couldn’t resist. He had to watch. Had to wait and see if the Chesapeake Ripper would show up.

Will carefully lifts the door handle, climbs into the backseat, and quietly closes the door behind him. He sits and waits, itching to catch Gideon. He's so close. So close to ending this.

That feeling of the end again. Like something deep inside him is about to erupt with volcanic force. Or cease all together.

Through the shimmer watering his vision, Will sees someone get in. Gideon. At last.

Gideon stops and notices Will.

"I was expecting the Chesapeake Ripper," Gideon says, turning his face back toward Will. "Or are you he?"

Hobbs. It's Hobbs. It's Garrett Jacob Hobbs, not Abel Gideon. Everything falls out from under Will like someone turned off the gravity. He can't tell if he's talking to Gideon or Hobbs or himself or thin air, if he's awake or dreaming, if anything is real.

Maybe he won't ever know again if anything is real.

"Turn around," Will commands weakly. "Don't look at me."

The Glock 22 speaks far more loudly than he can. Even as he holds it sloppily in his non-dominant hand, he's got a round chambered and his finger inside the trigger guard. Only the mechanical safety stands between his trigger pull and a burst of death. Whoever this is in front of him – Gideon, Hobbs, a hallucination – Will won't hesitate when he shoots.

But he needs to know who it is. He needs a handhold to reality.

"You are looking awfully peaky, Mr. Graham."

Will hears Gideon but sees Hobbs. Sometimes the faces morph together in a sickening miasma.

"I may be crazy, but you look ill."

This has to end. There's only one person he can trust to tell him what's real.

"Drive," Will orders.

"Who is your doctor?"

Hobbs is inside his head. He knows Will's thoughts. Will is sure he's pointing the gun away from himself but he can't know. Because Hobbs knows he was thinking about Hannibal.

Will gives him Hannibal's address. He spends the half-hour drive trying to breathe and think and stay awake. If he's awake in the first place. The eyes in the rearview mirror keep changing. The scene keeps melting and reconstituting. Any moment now he could plunge through to another reality. His blood screams with madness.

"Stop looking at me," Will growls.

He tightens his sweaty grip on the Glock. At this range, a headshot would result in an impressive exit wound. Will can see the splatter pattern across the shattered window. He can hear the color of the blood and brain matter, hear its heat as it melts down the glass.

Whether it's Gideon, Hobbs, or himself, he'd be doing the world a favor. There is no return for him. No exit but death. Put down like a rabid dog.

But it's probably not himself he's pointing the gun at. It's Gideon. Even if it looks like Hobbs, it's Gideon. It can't be Hobbs. Hobbs is dead. Hobbs is dead. Hobbs is dead.

Hobbs is dead rings in Will's ears along with his harsh breaths and the pounding of his pulse in the echo chamber of his skull.

Hobbs is dead. Hobbs is dead. Hobbs is dead.

The litany marks time as he frog marches his captive to Hannibal's front door. Hannibal will know. Hannibal will tell him what's real. Only Hannibal.

Remarkably or oddly – Will can't tell – Hannibal doesn't ask why Will is holding a gun on someone. He just lets them in and leads them both to the dining room. Hannibal gestures to a chair for Will's captive. Grateful for Hannibal's forbearance, Will tries to think of the words he needs to convey what's happening inside his head. They don't come easily. Everything hurts. Everything requires tremendous effort.

"I'm having a hard time thinking," he begins unsteadily.

But that's not it. That's not the thought that's raising his pulse, scaring him more than he's ever been scared before.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind." The worlds tumble out like they have their own life. Fear pulses through his cells. "I-I I don't know what's real."

He feels his body jerking, his muscles twitching, like an electrical current arcing over frayed wires. Harsh breaths pass in and out of his mouth. He hardly notices, focusing instead on Hannibal pushing back expensive fabric to expose an even more expensive watch.

No, no, no. He doesn't understand – he can't know the terror of not knowing what's real. But he must know why Will came here. He must. Gauge, paddle, anchor – whatever – just as long as he can say who's in that chair.

"It's 7:27 p.m.," Hannibal says, "you're in Baltimore, Maryland, and your name is Will Graham."

Will shakes his head violently. "I don't care who I am!" he shouts. "Just tell me," he says as he turns, panting heavily, and levels his gun at Gideon, "if he's real."

Hannibal looks from the captive to Will.

"Who do you see, Will?"

“Garret Jacob Hobbs.” Will’s urgent, half-whispered tone betrays his basest fear. “Who do you see?”

Hobbs has time to blink in spite of his zombie-like appearance. But he doesn’t stink of death. Each second that ticks by makes Will wonder why Hannibal’s hesitating, who is it he sees, who is it, who –

“I don’t see anyone.”

Will hears it. Hears the lie.

“No, he’s right there!” Will asserts even as the chair is now empty. It can’t be. Hobbs was just there.

“There’s no one there, Will.”

Can’t be. Hannibal took too long to speak. Hobbs was there.

“You’re lying!”

“You’re alone, you came here alone.” Hannibal’s soothing voice, like he’s a child who can’t take care of himself, who can’t handle the truth. “Do you remember coming here?”

“Please don’t lie to me,” Will cries.

And then everything accelerates. Electricity tingles all over his body. He feels the most terrible sense of foreboding as Hannibal speaks.

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead. You killed him. You watched him die.”

“What’s happening to me?!”

Words elongate. Reality warps around them and Will feels his body go rigid and then he’s falling backwards into places he knows he hasn’t been but nevertheless recognizes. Everything here has happened before. Uncanny. Free-floating. As though every aspect of his being is associative.

Then he feels himself accelerating back into another dimension. He hears himself take a painful breath.

“Will? Can you hear me?”

He wants to say yes but everything feels out of joint. Nothing makes sense. Everything hurts. Just breathing requires all of his strength.

“Repeat after me. My name is Will Graham.”

That makes sense. He feels himself breathing a little easier now. Foreboding lifts off his chest.

The answer slides out on an exhale. “My name is Will Graham.”

Quick intake of breath. Irregular. He feels irregular. Like he’s shifting in and out of phase. In and out of identity.

“Raise both of your arms.”

His muscles obey. Groan with effort.

“More.”

Will breathes harder, his heart pumping faster.

“More.”

Nearly over his head now.

“Good.”

He feels Hannibal fold his arms back against his body like he’s a doll.

“Although you may not feel like it, I need you to smile.”

Smile. Will looks through eyelashes at Hannibal. Hannibal’s here. Hannibal’s safety. Will urges his facial muscles up until they contort something approaching a smile.

Hannibal smiles back. “Good.”

He grabs a fistful of Will’s coat and guides him into a chair. Will’s blood roars louder in his ears, crowding out the wheezes burning in his chest.

“It wasn’t a stroke,” Hannibal says. “You may have had a seizure.” Hannibal sits next to him so they’re knee to knee. “Tell me the last thing you remember.”

He sees it so clearly: Hobbs, Hobbs was here.

Will looks down the table to the chair. No one’s there. No. That’s not right.

“I was with Garret Jacob Hobbs,” he answers, hearing himself breathe even harder as Hannibal places a palm to his forehead. He feels rough. Rougher. Like he doesn’t fit the outline of his skin.

Hobbs was there.

“You have a fever,” Hannibal says quietly. “You were hallucinating, you thought he was alive – here, in the room with you.”

No. No. Not true.

“I *saw him*,” Will asserts.

“He’s a delusion disguising reality,” Hannibal replies. “Don’t let that you let you slip away.”

Will sees only honesty in Hannibal’s face. Care and concern. But it didn’t feel like a hallucination. Hobbs was there. He saw Hobbs.

“You killed Garret Jacob Hobbs once,” Hannibal says as he stands. “You can find a way to kill him again.”

Hannibal’s putting on his coat, getting ready to go out.

“Where are you going?” Will hears himself ask.

“Abel Gideon is still at large,” Hannibal answers. “He mutilated Dr. Chilton. They found him, clinging to life. I’m worried about Alana.”

Will gets to his feet, her name on his lips, the need to protect her from that madman overwhelming uncertainty and hurt until he can’t feel them beneath the need to protect.

“No, no, no, no, no, Will,” Hannibal says as he rounds the dining table. Gently, he pushes Will back into the chair. “You’re in no state to go anywhere but the hospital. I’ll call Jack, tell him where you are.”

Will breaths heavily through exhaustion, tension, and fear as he watches Hannibal walk away. His eyes fall on the gun and a set of keys the table. The need to protect rises again.

Will stumbles through the front door, into the snow, and to Hannibal’s car. He’s got to get to Gideon before Gideon gets to Alana.

The drive is a blur. Will focuses on staying between the lines and driving the speed limit. The extra challenge of getting to her house nearly sends him off the road twice.

He spots the station wagon on the side of the street and parks behind it. Tracks. Where are the – *there*. Will stumbles through the snow for fifty yards before he spots the man himself staring into the window at Alana.

Bastard. Piece of shit. Scum.

Will snaps the holster open, lifts the gun, and tries to assume his best stance, tries to aim on the target. Forty yards. He’s shaking. Can’t hold the gun steady. No. Can’t risk it. He trudges on, gun still in hand, round chambered, finger inside the trigger guard, only the mechanical safety on.

He imagines shooting Gideon in the back of the head. It’s a bad shot. He can’t shoot in Alana’s direction. He’ll have to do it from the side.

Will hears himself struggling for breath and stops to catch it, holding the gun in Gideon’s direction in case he turns around. Because surely Gideon hears him. But Gideon isn’t going anywhere. He’s just standing there.

And Will remembers he's a victim, too. He'll try to take him into custody first, Will think as he steps next to Gideon.

Alana doesn't know they're here. Good.

"I don't know if I will ever be myself again," Gideon says. "I don't know if I've got any self left over."

Will's heart quickens.

"I spent so long thinking I was him," Gideon continues, "it's gotten really hard to remember who I was when I wasn't him."

Gideon knows him like Georgia knows him.

Will turns to look at him. Gideon. It's Gideon. Not Hobbs.

"Who are you now?" he hears himself ask.

And then it's Hobbs and fear surges through Will. It's Hobbs looking at him. Hobbs.

"Now I'm you," Hobbs says. "We're both here lookin' at her. Just those kinds of people who shouldn't be in a relationship. You and I are already committed. It's hard to be with another person when you can't get out of your own head."

Gideon again. It's Gideon, not Hobbs. Gideon he doesn't have to kill.

"I want to get out," Will says. Intensity constricts his focus until he can see nothing but the man in front of him. Gideon.

"Yeah, well, we all want things that we can't have," Gideon says. "But if I kill her like he would kill her, maybe I could understand him better."

Then he's Hobbs. He's Hobbs. Hobbs.

"I wonder if then you would finally understand what you've become?"

Hannibal's voice sounds in Will's head.

You killed Garret Jacob Hobbs once. You can find a way to kill him again.

Will raises the gun to Hobbs' chest and fires. Recoil sweeps through his arm as Hobbs shatters into water and falls into the snow. Adrenaline rushes into power and ecstasy. Will's heart beats furiously around the pure pleasure of absolute control.

Hobbs is dead. Hobbs is dead. Hobbs is dead.

The ground comes up fast to knock his knees and take his breath, but it can't take away the certainty coursing through him like a river finding the ocean.

My name is Will Graham.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

Chapter Summary

Alana stays with Will from the gunshot to the hospital. Rôti 3 / 4.

Chapter Notes

If you've read some of my other fic, you might recognize much of this chapter and the next one. Sorry that it's not totally new. I thought it fit well enough in this fic to justify inclusion. It also marks the entrance of Alana as a more central character in this story.

The gunshot startles Alana Bloom. Agent Kinz, her protective custody, responds by calling it in and telling her to stay put as he draws his gun and leaves the room. But she's seen that it's Will outside, that Will shot Gideon, that Will collapsed into the snow, and she's on Kinz's heels, pushing past him and ignoring his protests.

Alana kneels next to Will in the snow and quickly assesses him. Airway. She bends down and listens. Breathing fast but steadily. She tries to check him for blockages but can't see well enough.

"Kinz. Flashlight."

"Using it."

Rage momentarily blocks her vision.

"This is Special Agent Will Graham," she says tightly. "He just saved my life. I need your flashlight."

Kinz passes the flashlight to her and glances curiously at Will.

Alana ignores him. She checks Will's mouth for obstructions – clear – then rolls him onto his side and listens more carefully to his breathing. Shallow. Rapid. Labored. She counts twenty-five breaths per minute. Too fast. She places two fingers on his carotid and counts 182. Fast even for the serious effort his body's putting in to combat both the cold and the high fever she feels radiating off him.

Can't do anything about the fever, can do something about the cold.

Alana runs back into the house, grabs two coats and her purse, and slams the door behind her. She drapes one coat over Will and tucks it under him, puts the other coat on herself, then kneels and lifts his head into her lap, laying her palms over his cheeks.

A terse exchange with Kinz reveals that two ambulances are on their way. It's not fast enough. She has time to dwell, time to ask questions.

How long has Will been out in the cold? He's underdressed – no hat, no gloves, no scarf. He didn't intend to be out as long as he's been. He's sweating, too, even though his skin is cold to the touch.

Alana glances at the snow and sees two sets of tracks. One set is neat, the other crooked, like a drunk trying to stagger home. Which is why Will's sweating. How far did he walk? How did he know Gideon would be here?

Alana doesn't let herself speculate. She takes out her phone and calls Jack.

"Dr. Bloom," he answers tersely.

"Will is unconscious outside my house. He just shot Abel Gideon," Alana states, equally terse.

She hears him half-cover the phone and yell orders. The scuffle of boots fills the background.

Jack took Will with him tonight. Alana's mouth narrows into a thin line.

"What's their condition?" Jack barks into the phone.

"Will has a dangerously high fever and," she asks Kinz what happened to Gideon and repeats to Jack, "Gideon was shot in the chest. Still alive."

"You going to the hospital with him?" Jack asks.

Alana just sniffs into the phone.

"Meet you there," Jack says and hangs up.

As angry as she is with Jack for what she assumes is his complicity, she can't deny her own strong sense of guilt. She'd noticed Will was feverish earlier today. Jack had to have noticed it, too. But neither of them tried to get him to go home. Mostly because they both know he wouldn't listen, but still…

Something is wrong with him. Something more serious than just a fever.

Alana stops herself again before she can speculate too much. It does her no good. But this doesn't feel like speculation; it feels like the sort of gut instinct that shouldn't be ignored.

Fever. Auditory hallucinations. Headaches. Probably more than that. She hasn't asked and doesn't want to know. But whatever is wrong with him, it's getting worse.

Do you feel unstable?

His haunted face swims in front of her.

God, Will.

He came to see her earlier today because he felt protective. He was painfully obvious about it. And entirely genuine. And that's why he's lying unconscious in the snow. She brushes back his wet hair and fights tears that are far too close to the surface. Will got to be the hero after all. Attached to that thought is too much fondness for him. She wants to steal him away from the world. Keep him safe. Help him find happiness.

But that isn't the way things are.

Alana forces herself back to the present by bending down and saying his name. Tapping his shoulder. Tapping his cheek.

Nothing.

"Will?" she says into his ear. "Can you hear me?"

Still nothing.

The heavy weight of worry settles on her chest.

Alana sighs and brushes Will's hair back to place a palm on his forehead. He worked hard to get here. He was determined. He knew he was sick, too. But Will has always been sort of pigheadedly chivalrous, and she's always found that not just adorable but redeeming.

Case in point, she can't help but thinking.

Sirens in the distance. Alana relaxes fractionally. She bends down and places a kiss on Will's burning forehead.

"You'll be all right, Will," she whispers into his ear. The gesture makes her feel lighter, lets her breathe easier. Allows her to gently lay Will's head in the snow again so she can meet the EMTs and issue orders they'd damn well better follow.

Quickly, they get Will strapped to a gurney and into the warmth of the truck. Alana gloves up and helps the EMT remove Will's jacket and cut through his shirts. The EMT starts an IV while she assesses Will's responsiveness. His arm is slippery with sweat; his veins have receded so deeply due to dehydration that the EMT has trouble sticking him. Alana murmurs an apology as she runs her knuckles roughly along his sternum. His head jerks and an inarticulate, too-weak cry issues from him, but he doesn't wake.

"105.3," the EMT says.

God, he's ill.

Alana watches the EMT administer a hefty dose of acetaminophen. Between it and the fluids, Will's temperature should start to drop soon. But soon is not soon enough. Now would be better. Five minutes ago would be better still.

Alana stays close as they enter the Emergency Department. She answers questions, volunteers pertinent information, and keeps out of the way. They must assume she's his wife because they don't ask her to leave. She doesn't correct them.

But she does turn her back when a tech starts undressing him. Not like this.

When she turns around, Will looks far too sick and helpless in a pale green gown that worsens his pallor. The phlebotomist leaves with tubes of blood and Alana is finally alone with Will. She approaches him slowly, feeling like she's invading his privacy, and takes up his too-warm, limp hand.

I don't think we've ever been alone in a room together.

How many times did he say that? Once when she read to Abigail while she was in the hospital. Again when she went to his house.

I'm compelled to go cover myself.

I have brothers.

Earlier today, she'd thought about him as acting like her protective older brother. She's tried to think of him that way – sort of – in that a brother is a male friend with whom she's chastely close. She can tease a brother and she likes to tease Will. Funny thing is, she didn't realize she was doing that until just now.

All of this because the night she stopped by his house, she'd been ready to tell him that it was time for her to stop thinking so much. But she'd found him tearing a column of bricks out of his chimney because he thought he heard an animal trapped inside. Just like he thought he heard an animal in the field next to his house. She couldn't ignore the bright red warning flag those actions sent up.

Alana studies Will's unconscious face, wondering if he's still hearing wounded animals. His mind is turning on him, tricking him with his greatest fears.

And that's why she can't…

He understands. He's been good about understanding.

But he just helped save her life –

Alana stops herself. She isn't going to run through the arguments she's had with herself repeatedly since Will began having problems. She sighs instead and holds Will's hand more tightly.

Will's temperature is down to 104.1 when Jack pokes his head in. Only the fact that he's had the self-serving forethought to bring her a cup of coffee spares him from her most venomous

glare.

Alana steps just outside the door of the exam room, not wanting to stray far.

“How is he?” Jack asks.

“Still unconscious,” Alana answers tersely. “His temperature was 105.3 when he collapsed.”

Jack winces.

“It hasn’t come down much yet,” Alana adds with a look over her shoulder at Will. She turns back and crosses her arms around the coffee.

“Did you need him with you?”

Jack reads her posture; his expression hardens. “He seemed okay when we left Quantico. You were there.”

Alana nods grudgingly. As soon as Will pointed out that the Ripper told them where to find Gideon, she’d known there’d be a raid. She hadn’t thought about whether he’d go, but… of course he’d go…

“Will usually falls asleep if we have a drive longer than hour,” Jack explains. “He looked terrible when he woke up. I asked him to stay in the vehicle.” Jack shrugs. “He chose to get out. We found his tracks. They terminated at a vehicle – Gideon’s vehicle. The same one we found near your house.”

Jack shakes his head and glances past Alana toward Will. For a moment, he beams like a proud father. There’s too much of that between them, Alana thinks as she does Will’s eye-contact avoidance trick of looking just past someone to read expression, intent, and motive.

After a moment, Jack turns serious again. “I have a lot of questions for him when he wakes up. Any idea what’s wrong with him?”

Alana shakes her head. “Right now, just the fever. We’re waiting on test results. A little worried that he hasn’t woken up yet.” Alana eyes Jack. “It’s too early to tell, but with fevers like this, brain damage is a possibility.”

Jack glances from her to Will again and manages to look slightly contrite.

“Will is resilient,” he asserts.

“Will is human,” Alana retorts.

Jack’s silence is all the answer she needs.

“You staying?” he asks after a while.

Alana nods. “At least until he’s settled.”

Jack offers a small smile and a quick, approving nod, then excuses himself.

Will is just as Alana left him – though she notices his heart rate and blood pressure have come down some. Perhaps from hearing familiar voices.

A vision of him asleep on a couch in Abigail's hospital room flashes before her. Once she was sure he hadn't woken up, she'd let herself stare at him for a long time. Boyish. Then and now. Innocent in spite of everything he sees. A good man.

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth as she remembers what she read to Abigail that day. Will had slept through half of the story before he woke up looking far too ruffled and cute. She'd had a hard time keeping her distance.

I was just enjoying listening to you read.

Alana takes out her phone, opens an app, and selects the same story she was reading to Abigail months ago while Will was in the room. Alana wheels a stool next to him, takes his hand, and begins: "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida…"

She hardly makes it to the annoying grandkids before a nurse comes in to check his temperature again. It's dropped a few tenths of a degree and his blood pressure and heart rate have come down slightly more, too. He's more responsive when a nurse takes knuckles to his sternum again. His pained groan isn't as weak this time. Better still, his eyes crack open.

"Mr. Graham?"

Alana steps closer. "Will?"

His eyes roll around his head and try to fix on her, but he doesn't have much control over them. She sees him make a weak effort before what she hopes is exhaustion drags him back under.

"That's good," the nurse says with a smile Alana can't return. "He'll be taken for a CT scan soon."

Alana nods at that, satisfied that everyone is doing their jobs. She waits until the nurse leaves to take Will's hand again, nurturing the anger she has at Jack for taking Will to the crime scene and at Will for taking such poor care of himself. It's the only thing stopping an avalanche of worry from crashing down on her.

She reads on. The stubborn grandmother stows away her cat; the parents are sandwiched between generations. The family stops for barbecue as Will's initial blood test results come in. White blood cell count two times normal. Indicators of dehydration and poor nutrition. Nothing causal.

An infection his body's fighting. Could be something as simple as the flu. Maybe a bacterial infection. Easily treatable.

Alana doesn't let herself think further. She resumes the story.

When the staff takes Will for the scan, Alana walks across the street to Starbucks. As the coffee cools on the counter, Alana wonders what sort of state Will was in when he shot Gideon. They'd been facing each other. Talking? Or did one walk up to the other? How did he know where to find Gideon in the first place?

Alana carries the coffee into the cold and waits at the crosswalk for the light to change. He was so cold to the touch where he wasn't burning up. He'd been out in the cold for at least half an hour.

When she re-enters the hospital and makes her way back to the exam room, Hannibal is there in his overcoat watching Will.

"Alana," Hannibal says brightly. He holds out an arm for a friendly hug and kisses her hair affectionately. "It's good to see you."

Alana nods and clings to him for a moment. To her great chagrin, she can't stop herself from choking up. Hannibal offers a reassuring squeeze and holds her a little longer than he probably should.

"I was worried," Hannibal says. He turns his attention to Will, who's back from the scan and seemingly the same as he was when she left. "Good to see him, too."

Alana collects herself with a sip of coffee.

"It's nice of you to visit him this late," she says.

Hannibal nods at a bag next to the gurney. "I thought he might like some of his own clothes. Some of his sleepwear didn't go home with him when he left."

Alana smiles at Hannibal's thoughtfulness. "I'm sure he will."

Her smile fades quickly. She catches Hannibal's eye. "I want to ask… as his friend… how he's doing."

Hannibal studies her for a moment. "How does he seem to be doing?"

Alana recognizes the move. She uses it all the time. But isn't that why she brought this up?

"Worse," Alana answers. "He sees too much. Gets too close."

Hannibal nods. "I agree. But he refuses to stop or even take a break."

They both look at Will, still unconscious on the gurney, his skin sallow in the florescent light. Neither of them has to point out that Will's getting a break now whether he likes it or not.

They stand silently for a moment before Hannibal speaks again. "If you're feeling responsible for this in any way, you're not."

Alana smiles wistfully. "That's what he would say," she says with a glance at Will. "You have that in common, too."

Hannibal mirrors her expression. “Will and I have more in common than either of us supposed.” Then his expression changes and she sees the complexity of their relationship. She’s suddenly happy she and Jack brought them together. They’ve been good for each other.

After a moment, Hannibal turns back to her. “I’m afraid I can’t stay. If you’re here when he wakes up, please pass along my best wishes.”

“Of course,” Alana answers with a smile.

Hannibal returns her smile and leaves.

She settles next to Will again, reminds him of what was happening in the story, and reads on.

“‘A good man is hard to find,’ Red Sammy said. ‘Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more.’”

Will’s eyes begin to move beneath their lids. His hand twitches. Alana smiles faintly at the signs that Will is passing into sleep.

His respite doesn’t last long, though. The gains she makes are undone when Will is moved to his room. Alana frowns until she meets the charge nurse, secures permission to stay with Will, and sees him settled in his room. Still at 103.8. Responsive to painful stimuli but not awake yet.

Alana sits back in a chair and tries not to think about what else might be wrong with Will. She takes his hand again instead and resumes the story.

Will improves gradually as the story turns sinister. His eyes shuttle back and forth as the family gets lost only to be found in the woods by the Misfit. The Misfit’s minions take the grandmother’s son and grandson into the woods.

“There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another,” she reads. “Then silence. The old lady's head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath.”

It isn’t the best story to read to someone with Will’s imagination, she realizes, but it’s calming him rather than upsetting him, so she continues. The grandmother tries to appeal to the Misfit’s sense of decency. The mother and daughter are led of into the woods.

“‘I call myself The Misfit,’ he said, ‘because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.’ There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report. ‘Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain’t punished at all?’”

Does Will imagine the scene in the woods? His face seems placid enough even as he dreams.

“She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and

shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them."

Will's glasses? Where did they end up? He hadn't been wearing them.

She finishes the story, puts her phone away, and finds the bag containing Will's clothes. They're wet, some with snow, some with sweat. His glasses are in his shirt pocket. She fishes them out and places them on the table next to the bed, doing her best to feel nothing.

Alana swallows the last of the coffee, throws the cup away, and takes hold of Will's hand again. She starts another story and nearly finishes it before the words stop making sense and her chin falls to her chest.

True Love Waits

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up. "Rôti" 4 / 4.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And true love waits
In haunted attics
And true love lives
On lollipops and crisps

Just don't leave
Don't leave

- Radiohead, “True Love Waits”

It could be ten minutes or a few hours later when Alana wakes to see Will thrashing on the bed. His eyes shuttle wildly back and forth beneath their lids. *Seizure* is all she can think, and she’s about to get a nurse when the pattern of the eye movement tells her it’s a nightmare.

Though she’s relieved, her face falls as she watches him struggle. Will’s sharp, terrified gasps fill the room as he claws ineffectively at the bed. His muscles shake with strain – and no wonder: the heart monitor reads 176. His color is gone; he’s not just pale but nearly grey. His hair, which had finally dried and fluffed up before she fell asleep, is matted to his head again. Patches of sweat soak through the gown and make his skin shine sickly in the soft light of the lamp.

This isn’t a nightmare: it’s a night terror.

Rare in adults. Probably caused by stress and compounded by fever and trauma.

But it could be something much more sinister. Epilepsy. Some personality disorders. He’s hallucinated and not known it. Could be… Could be a lot of things.

Will continues to struggle. Alana suddenly envisions him like this on that bed he keeps in his living room, surrounded by seven dogs who don’t know what to do. Her heart breaks a little for him.

A nurse comes in, summoned by the heart monitor, and stands aside when Alana explains that Will suffers from frequent nightmares.

“Will,” she says, bending down so he can hear her, “you’re okay. You’re dreaming.”

She has to stop herself from touching him. He’s too volatile. It’s too risky.

“You’re in the hospital,” she soothes. “You’re sick. You’ll be okay. Can you wake up for me?”

Nothing. Will fights his demons long enough for Alana’s thoughts to turn to brain damage. The heat radiating from his body is palpable. He’s going to hurt himself, if he hasn’t already.

She’s ready to intervene more forcefully when Will’s eyes fly open and dart wildly around the room. They find her and stop, and she sees him there, confused and scared but present. Some of the tension drains out of her muscles.

“Hi,” she says with a smile. “You’re in the hospital.”

Will stares, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath.

“Do you know who you are?” she asks tentatively, trying not to feel so much for him.

Will swallows as his breathing slows. He looks from her to the nurse and back.

“My name is Will Graham,” he says in a gravelly voice. Though it sounds like a trained response, he looks certain.

“Yes, good,” she says with a big smile. “Would you like some water?”

He nods. The disorientation in his face shapes itself into questions as he brings a hand up to rub his eyes. Headache? Or is he just tired? Hard to tell. He’s still radiating heat like a furnace. Unlike earlier in the day when he’d had a fever but hidden it well, he’s openly tired and worn. She wants to steal him away from this world to a place where he won’t be shadowed by violence so he can recover in peace. She wants very much to stop thinking that thought.

Will accepts a plastic cup from the nurse and props himself up on his elbows to drink. His gaze shifts just to the right of her as he tries to put the pieces together. The intensity she sees in his expression is just this side of frightening.

She lets none of this show on her face.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Alana asks.

Will studies her for a moment as he drinks, then hands the cup back to the nurse and lies down. He doesn’t answer right away. He looks as lost and alone as anyone she’s ever seen. Without thinking, Alana takes his hand.

Will glances down at their hands in surprise and disbelief – as though no one has held his hand before. Her heart breaks a little more.

“I remember you,” he says.

Will squeezes her hand lightly; she squeezes back without hesitation. The smile they exchange is warm and genuine and human – and interrupted by the nurse putting a thermometer in Will's ear. Will's face crinkles with annoyance.

"102.8," the nurse reports.

Will seems not to care, his eyes fixed on Alana. He's doing that thing where he doesn't realize he's staring… which is so odd for someone averse to eye contact.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

Will shoots another annoyed glance at the nurse, who's inflating a blood pressure cuff on his arm, before looking back to Alana. His eyes soften. He seems happy to see her, as though he's gotten something he very much wanted.

"Okay," he answers, fingering the edge of the blanket. "Tired." Now that he's settled down, he looks it. The night terror drew on energy reserves he didn't have.

The nurse takes over the questioning. "Any dizziness or nausea?"

Will shakes his head a fraction.

"Does anything hurt?"

"No," he answers, then rethinks it as he closes his eyes. "Well, yes. I've got a headache." He flinches at the word, as though mentioning it makes it worse. He rubs his eyes. "But I always have a headache."

Alana makes a note to ask about that later.

"Sore throat? Muscle aches?" the nurse asks.

Will shakes his head again, eyes on the wall, thinking. "I'm just tired."

The nurse nods.

Alana offers Will a smile she doesn't feel. "Other than that and the fever, you seem fine."

Will glances back at her and narrows his eyes. "So, they don't know what's wrong with me?"

His tone betrays such a complex array of emotions that she could try to take it apart for weeks and still not find everything. His eyes brim with memories he'll never share with her. He's apprehensive and more doubtful than hopeful, but that glint of hope makes her want answers even more than she already did. They both look expectantly at the nurse.

"You have an infection," the nurse answers as she takes notes on his chart. "We're still waiting on some test results to determine the cause."

Still nothing. Damn.

Will frowns and withdraws, gazing into the distance beyond the foot of the bed. He relaxes visibly once the nurse leaves. Alana is pleased that Will can relax around her, that she's one of the few people he trusts. His hand slackens in hers, then tightens again when he notices his loose grip.

He seems to notice for the first time how damp he is. He disentangles his hand to wipe it on the blanket.

"Sorry about the sweat," he apologizes with the tiniest of self-effacing, self-conscious smiles.

Alana retrieves paper towels from the bathroom. When she returns, he's already removed the gown, careful to keep the blanket pulled up to his stomach, and balled it up so he can dry his arms, chest, and face. When he tosses it toward the medical waste bin, the normality of the gesture cheers her. That he's coordinated enough to do that bodes well. Him being comfortable enough with her to be half-naked… well, she *has* been treating him like a brother.

Will accepts the paper towels and dabs at his hair. He's made a little progress when the nurse returns with an orderly and fresh, folded linens. Alana turns her back while they help Will into a new gown and then into the chair she'd occupied so they can change the sheets. She pulls up another chair to sit next to him and does her best not to notice the angry scar peaking out from under the gown.

Will's eyes drift around the room. He's more with it than a person as sick as he is should be, which goes a long way toward easing her fears about brain damage. Maybe he can come away from this quickly – and stronger.

"What else do you remember?" she asks. Though she doesn't want to press him, talking will help. Better to talk with a friend first than to have to narrate his version of events for the first time to someone like Jack.

Will blinks rapidly for a moment, searching his memory, then sighs and looks away.

"I was with Garret Jacob Hobbs. Outside your house. I don't know what he was doing there, but he wanted to hurt you and – "

His face contorts.

"I shot him."

Will stares into the distance.

"I don't remember anything after that."

"Garret Jacob Hobbs?" Alana repeats, trying to keep the alarm out of her voice. Hallucination. Could be the fever… but given his history –

"Will," Alana says carefully, "you shot Abel Gideon."

“Gideon,” Will repeats vacantly, still staring at nothing. He doesn’t look surprised. His eyes narrow as he concentrates, then pinch around the corners with pain.

“I remember… finding Gideon’s vehicle near the observatory… I, ah, waited for him. He… he thought I was the Chesapeake Ripper.” He barks a hollow laugh and rubs his eyes. “Everything after that… I’m not sure… I think we went to Dr. Lecter’s house… then I was with Hobbs outside your house. Between then…” Will winces and shakes his head. “It’s like trying to look through fog.”

“You had a dangerously high fever,” Alana responds. “It’s not surprising you don’t remember everything.”

Will nods distractedly and presses a hand to his eyes again. “Where are my clothes?”

Alana frowns apologetically. “Your shirts didn’t make it. Hannibal brought you some clean clothes.” She gestures toward a neat stack of laundry bundles. The questioning look doesn’t leave Will’s face, so Alana gestures again, this time to a bag next to the bedside table.

“Hannibal was here?” Will asks as she hands him the bag. He rifles through it and finds aspirin.

“He came by to check on you and drop those off,” she answers. “Maybe you did go to his house. He didn’t mention it – but he looked worried.”

Will narrows his eyes again, scouring his memory. After a moment, he sighs in frustration.

Alana sits forward in the chair, wanting to reach out for his hand. “Give it time.”

Will blinks and glances at her hands as though he’s reading her intentions. He looks away and nods.

The nurse and orderlies leave and Will slowly climbs back into bed. He pulls the clean blanket up to his chest and shivers at the warmth. Alana settles into the chair next to the bed again and fights the impulse to brush his hair back from his forehead.

Instead, she takes his hand again.

“It’s… impressive that you were able to do what you did,” she says quietly, hoping he won’t mistake her meaning.

Will’s face darkens. “He was going to hurt you.”

Protective brother again, but she notices a more pronounced mood shift this time. Her subconscious adds another variable to an equation she doesn’t know she’s working on.

“He probably would have,” Alana agrees, trying to balance concern with guilt. “Thank you for stopping him.”

Will smiles. A contented expression appears on his face as though that was all he ever wanted to hear. He searches her eyes until his own begin to droop. He looks ready to drift off again.

Good. Sleep is best for him right now. But he needs to be examined; the sooner the better so he can rest without interruption.

“I’m going to go find your doctor,” she says and makes a move to release his hand.

Will’s hand grips hers tightly and his eyes fly open. “No, stay.” His eyes cling to hers as though she’s the only thing keeping him together.

He realizes what he’s doing and takes a mental step back. “I mean, thank you for staying,” he says in a small voice. “Earlier.” He releases her hand and looks over at the wall.

Her heart constricts. She takes his hand back and gives it another reassuring squeeze. He doesn’t squeeze back this time.

“It’s okay,” she says warmly. “I’ll stay. They know you’re awake.”

He nods briefly and his lips quirk in a smile. She sees a thought come to him and his smile fade. His worried gaze searches her face.

“You *are* all right, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine,” she answers. “You stopped him.”

Will nods with palpable relief. Then his face turns troubled again. “Did I… ah… is Gideon… ?”

“He was in surgery last I heard,” Alana answers.

Will stares into space. After a while, he says, “I didn’t want to hurt him.”

Alana clasps her other hand on top of Will’s. “I know you want to figure this out but – ”

The door opens before she can finish her sentence. Alana releases Will’s hand and moves out of the way as the doctor comes in. His eyes track her and he scowls when the doctor’s questions and physical examination demand his attention. Alana keeps her eyes trained on the doctor, evaluating her examination of Will. He passes the neurological exam with ease. Thank God.

Will is irritable, though – in the way someone in his condition has every right to be – and answers questions in as few words as possible. He feels exposed, perhaps even violated by the exam, which he sees as an intrusion rather than a doctor trying to diagnose him. Given his history of being poked and prodded by psychiatrists, it’s no surprise that he doesn’t appreciate medical evaluations.

“I’m not seeing anything abnormal, Mr. Graham,” the doctor says after she finishes the exam.

“So you still don’t know what’s wrong with me?” Will growls, his voice rising with anger.

“We’ll keep looking,” she answers. “We’re waiting on some bacterial cultures, too.”

Will falls back into frustration with a poorly disguised huff.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Graham,” she says. “We’ll get an answer for you.”

Will glares at her back as she leaves the room.

“They’ll find out what’s causing this,” Alana adds.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” Will mumbles. His eyelids are drooping again, either because exhaustion is catching up with him or he’s uncomfortable with the subject. Either way, he needs to sleep.

Alana can’t say why she does it, but she places her free hand on his cheek and leans in to kiss his other cheek lightly. She pulls back before he can try to turn into it. He stares at her lips; she ducks her head to catch his eyes with her own. *Yes,* she tries to convey, *eventually, maybe, but not now.*

“You’ll be okay, Will,” she says and holds his gaze until he nods almost imperceptibly. He doesn’t need to believe that himself; he just needs to know that someone’s in his corner. “Thank you – for what you did tonight.”

She removes her hand from his cheek and takes his hand again. He’s dumbfounded – but that’s better than dejected.

“I was reading to you earlier,” Alana says. “You didn’t seem to mind.”

“I wouldn’t mind now,” Will replies hoarsely. A smile ghosts his lips. “Flannery O’Connor?”

Alana smiles back. “Unless you’d prefer something else.”

“No,” Will answers. “What’s the one about the Bible salesman who steals the artificial leg?”

Alana opens the story. She reads until Will’s hand goes slack in hers, then sits back and watches him sleep for several minutes, raging silently over how unfair life has been to Will Graham. When she finally makes herself get up, the cumulative effect of too much adrenaline, too much coffee, and too many caffeine crashes make her wish she could curl up next to him.

Thankfully, the cab ride home isn’t long. Yellow crime scene tape still cordons off her yard, marking the violence and insanity that threatened it. That Will stopped. The cabbie is considerate enough to ask if she wants to go somewhere else. She tips him well and returns to her empty house. She can see why Will keeps dogs, she thinks as she lets herself in. She could use some companionship right now. Instead, she’s trapped inside her own head.

It’s probably pointless to try to go to bed now, but the routine of getting ready for bed makes her feel better. She can’t stop thinking about everything Will has been through, though. She’s going to go to Jack in the morning and make some demands on his behalf – demands that she thinks the situation itself makes, but that Jack won’t necessarily see. She’ll have to pick her words and her tone carefully or Jack might think she’s speaking not as Will’s friend but as

something more than that, and she'll be damned if she's going to be taken less seriously because of a relationship she isn't even in yet.

A relationship that, at this rate, may never happen.

She thinks of Will waking up from a night terror alone and scared, and she hugs the spare pillow tightly, pouring all of her emotions into it. Oh, how she would hold him like he's the most precious thing in the world. How she would kiss the stubble on his cheeks and run her fingers through his hair and press him to her until his fears quieted and he knew he was not just loved but cherished. How it hurts that she may never get the chance to do any of those things.

When her alarm sounds in the morning, Alana is still awake, still hugging the pillow, still staring at the empty space in her bed.

Chapter End Notes

Would love to know what you think.

Go to Sleep

Chapter Summary

Poor Will. Poor Georgia. Relevés 1/3.

Memory believes before knowing remembers.

- William Faulkner

I'm gonna go to sleep
And let this wash all over me

- Radiohead, "Go to Sleep"

Things are fuzzy and uncomfortable every time Will drifts into wakefulness. To their credit, the nurses try to be stealthy, but their touches rouse him again and again from uneasy sleep. As soon as they leave, he sinks back into an abyss where memories and dreams flash in the absinthe light of the deep ocean.

Eventually, he follows one of the flashes into a hazy dream of Alana and the dogs playing an elaborate game of fetch in the field near his house. Golden sunlight falls on Alana's cheeks so they glow rosy above her smile as she throws a tennis ball for Winston. Her laughter echoes across the field.

Will wants to content himself with the serene scene, but something's off. Something doesn't feel right. Jackson's ears perk up, followed quickly by Horace's, and then Will knows: there's something in the woods.

Waiting. Watching.

Will leaves Alana and Winston with the others and takes Horace and Jackson with him. The moment they step into the woods, the dogs' hackles rise. Horace growls faintly. They stand and listen more than they walk, waiting for the watcher to make a mistake. Twilight fades to moon-lit darkness. Nocturnal animals scratch beyond the reach of Will's flashlight.

Suddenly, a cry unlike any Will has ever heard freezes his blood. Horace and Jackson bark wildly and sprint into the darkness. Will crashes through the brush after them, heedless of the thorns and branches tearing through his shirt. He stops and listens, picks them up, and charges in a different direction. When he stops again, they're too far away for him to hear.

He doubles over, winded from the chase, and for a moment hears nothing but his own heavy breathing.

The cry, much closer this time, makes his heart jump into his throat. He feels eyes watching him. Slowly, he turns to his right, making a circle, sure each time that he'll see in the darkness the owner of that primitive scream.

Then he feels the creature next to him, hears it breathing, senses its size and shape. Will turns to look – and sees a ceiling.

He blinks in confusion, breathing fast with fear. A few seconds pass before he remembers where he is and why. He looks at his wrist where his watch normally is and sees an IV instead. Annoying. He listens. Quiet. Feels like early morning. Maybe 5 a.m.

Will reaches toward the lamp and squints when the light assaults his eyes. He gets to his feet, digs out more aspirin, and stretches his stiff, sore muscles on the short walk to the bathroom.

He replays his last memory: waking up to see Alana looking down on him, talking about what he remembered. The circumstances were less than ideal, but it's a good memory. The beginning of a smile appears on Will's face before it's quashed by images of Hobbs. Hobbs driving him somewhere. Shooting Hobbs and watching him liquefy outside Alana's house. He feels so sure that those things happened even as he knows it's impossible. Hobbs is dead.

Hobbs is dead.

Will repeats the thought to himself as he washes his hands. Coming out of the bathroom, he spots the clothes Hannibal brought. As he unwraps one of the bundles, something in his gut tugs. It's a sort of sick emptiness – the kind he feels when he forgets to eat once too often. But this time Hannibal is the sustenance…

Will has no idea what to do with that feeling. A sudden rush of hormones burns his blood. He puts a calming hand on his half-hard dick and quickly pulls up the underwear and sweatpants. It's pent-up arousal choosing the most convenient outlet. That's all. Because Alana leaning in to kiss his cheek – the smell of her, the same perfume – having her so close –

Will clamps down on those thoughts before they get away from him. He thinks about Hannibal instead, intending to conjure Hannibal in one of his suits in the office. Hannibal the professional. But it's Hannibal the lover naked in his arms who appears before him. Will shudders as a wave of pleasure gets him embarrassingly hard. He thinks about his dogs instead. Alone in the dark house, wondering where he is. Guilt chases his problem away. He adjusts himself in his underwear with a promise to take care of it when he has some time alone and doesn't feel so wrung out.

He sits on the edge of the bed, feeling more tired than he should and looking foolish in a hospital gown and pajama pants. Having learned about tangling IV lines in clothing, he knows he has to leave it on until someone helps him out. He wishes he'd paid more attention to whatever it was Hannibal did to disconnect the thing. He curls up on his side and stares into space, his mind back in the blurry recesses of last night.

Hobbs. It couldn't have been Hobbs. Hobbs is dead.

An image of Hobbs' bone-white corpse, riddled with bullet holes, rises before him. He hears the chatter of Katz, Price, and Zeller.

"How much lead are you gonna pull out of that stiff?" Price asks as he looks down his nose at Zeller.

"Enough to make a trophy," Zeller answers with too much glee.

Katz turns a chastising gaze on Zeller.

"Memento," Zeller corrects. He picks another fragment out of Hobbs' shredded lungs and drops it in a dish nearly full of fragments. "What about an acrylic case?"

"Classy," Prize interjects approvingly.

"Not sure he'd appreciate it," Katz says. "How about one of those clackin', swingin' ball things?"

Her wry smile, always a welcome sight, dissolves into a dark hospital room.

Will blinks, not sure what he just witnessed. If it was a hallucination, it was a mundane one. It feels like a memory – except he knows he wasn't there for that conversation, knows he's reconstructing it.

Will's insides curl up on themselves.

What the hell is happening to me?

Tired but too restless to lie still any longer, Will works his way back to his feet and the bathroom. He splashes water on his face and neck, giving himself the best sink bath he can manage. While drying off with the hospital gown balled up in one hand, Will notices the name of the hospital on his bracelet.

University of Maryland Medical Center.

Georgia Madchen's here. Room 401.

He hears the door open and pokes his head out of the bathroom to see a mildly annoyed night nurse with her hands on her hips. Will reads in her face a long night and no patience for troublemakers. He hides his sneer.

"Having trouble sleeping, Mr. Graham?"

"Just wanted to clean up a little," Will grouses as he makes his way back to bed.

He shows off his dilemma with the hospital gown and watches carefully as the nurse disconnects the IV line so he can put on his shirt. There are more questions this time; they grate on his nerves until his answers become growls.

“Feeling irritable?”

Will glowers in response.

“Your temperature’s gone up again,” the nurse explains. “You need to rest. You can have something to help you sleep.”

Will shakes his head. “No,” he says emphatically. “No drugs.”

The nurse looks ever so slightly disappointed.

Will half-listens as she tells him again to rest and leaves to get another dose of acetaminophen. Thinking of Georgia brought his mind back online. She looked better when he last saw her…nearly a week ago? Will counts days. Five. Five days ago. He’s due for a visit. If anyone knows what he feels like right now, it’s her.

He waits for the nurse to return with the medicine, then waits another five minutes, his mind buzzing with the fragments of thoughts and memories he desperately wants to connect. He repeats what he saw the nurse do with the IV so he can put on the robe Hannibal brought, then walks softly down the hall toward the elevator.

He can see through the glass doors that she’s awake. Will smiles to himself as he quietly slips inside. Five days have done her a world of good.

Will finds the intercom switch. “You look better.”

“Do I look alive?” she asks.

He knows exactly what to say for once. “You look pretty.”

Flattered, Georgia brushes her hair away from her face. “Must be all the oxygen.”

Will laughs with her until she turns serious, looking him over. “They say what’s wrong with you?”

Will looks down. “Oh, just the fever. They’re trying to find out what else.”

“They won’t find anything,” Georgia says with conviction. “They’ll keep looking, keep taking tests, keep giving false diagnosis, bad meds. They won’t find out what’s wrong. They’ll just know that you’re wrong.”

Will doesn’t want her to be right, but he worries she is. He keeps his lips slightly upturned so he won’t look too upset.

“I hope you have good insurance,” she jokes.

“I do, too,” Will answers quietly.

“They’re going to give me shock treatment,” Georgia continues. “Electro-convulsive therapy is what it’s called. Shock treatment sounds nicer.”

Will hears the fear she's trying to hide. He knows the exact tenor and pitch of that fear.

He walks closer to her along the side of the tube. "People who have what you have can recover with shock treatment?"

She fixes a staid gaze on him. "Do you know how many times I've been told I could recover with treatment?"

Will drops his head in acknowledgement.

"They said I might remember what I did," she says. "But I don't wanna remember."

"You know what you did, Georgia," Will says quietly.

"But I don't remember it," she answers. "It feels more like a horrible dream where I killed my best friend."

Something about the way she says it trips a wire in Will's mind.

"You dream about killing anybody else?" he asks without knowing why he's asking.

"I dreamed you killed that doctor," she answers immediately. Then she stills and stares into the distance, remembering. "But I couldn't see your face."

Someone else was there in Sutcliffe's office. Someone else killed Sutcliffe.

Will's absolutely sure. Georgia doesn't deny killing her best friend; she has no reason to deny killing a doctor she doesn't know.

She saw someone who didn't want to be seen.

He knows this is true. Knows it. But he needs evidence and all the evidence he has is against her.

"It's good to see you, Georgia," he says with a quick smile.

The look she gives him says she wonders what he's thinking but isn't going to ask.

"Good to see you, too, Will."

Will flips the switch for the intercom and offers a parting smile, his mind galloping. Georgia didn't kill Sutcliffe. Someone else did. Someone else killed Sutcliffe the way Georgia killed Beth LeBeau. A copycat.

Or *the* Copy Cat?

By the time Will comes up with those connections, he's nearly back in his room and weary to his bones. The nurse spots him before he can slip inside and scolds him with a glare. He earns even more scorn when he's discovered with the IV disconnected as he sheds the robe. Will sits like a scofflaw through a brief lecture and refuses to lie down until she leaves.

When she finally does leave, he collapses onto the bed. He wants to think – he feels the tug of more connections in his mind – but the weight of exhaustion won't let him. As soon as he closes his aching eyes, he's dragged down into a restless sleep punctuated with faceless killers carving up Dr. Sutcliffe's cheeks.

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Graham is asleep."

Hannibal smiles. "My apologies," he says. "I should have introduced myself."

He waits for her to look at him. When she takes in his appearance, his accent, and his bearing, she pauses. Hannibal's smile grows ever so slightly.

"I'm Dr. Hannibal Lecter," he says, holding his hand out and shaking hers warmly. "Will Graham is my patient. As you may know, he was involved in a shooting last night."

Hannibal waits for the nurse to nod. He sees in her face that she's spoken on the phone with someone from the FBI. Jack Crawford has not been here yet.

"You may also know that he suffered a near-fatal gunshot recently. I'm aware he needs rest – I have often urged Will to get more rest – but I worry he will react poorly to this trauma." Hannibal glances anxiously toward Will's room. "I hope he hasn't had a bad night."

The nurse's mouth narrows into a thin line and, as he knew she would, she tells Hannibal everything he needs to know about Will's night. Will's scornful behavior he expected; the truancy he did not.

Hannibal smiles again. Will has bought himself more time with his illness. His abrasiveness raised the ire of someone authorized to drug him. When he wakes, he'll know he's been drugged and leave at the first opportunity. He will not wait for answers about a malady he does not wish to acknowledge.

The door makes no noise when Hannibal slips inside. Will doesn't stir. Hannibal opens a container soundlessly and waits for the smell to wake Will. This little kindness pleases him.

Will takes a deep breath and opens his eyes. Hannibal reads in them how little Will remembers.

"Smells delicious," Will says tiredly.

"Silkie chicken in a broth," Hannibal replies. "A black-boned bird prized in China for its medicinal values since the seventh century. Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise."

"You made me chicken soup?"

Hannibal hears how groggy Will is, but there's no excuse for such simplicity. He glares at Will.

"Yes."

“Sorry,” Will mumbles as he slowly pushes himself up to a sitting position. “Chinese medicinal chicken broth. It smells great.” He rubs a hand over his face. “What time is it?”

Hannibal checks his watch. “11:47 a.m.”

Will raises his eyebrows, surprised he’s slept so long. He swings his legs off the bed and gets to his feet with a wobble. He stops, closes his eyes, and presses a steadying hand to the mattress. Dizziness. Low blood sugar. Hannibal surreptitiously watches Will fight through it. He struggles so admirably.

After a moment, Will straightens up and pads wearily to the chair Hannibal has pulled out for him. “Thanks for bringing the clothes.” He sits gratefully and looks into the bowl. “Black-boned, huh?”

“The Chinese believe this dish cures headaches.”

Will’s mouth quirks as he dips the spoon in the soup. “Hope so.”

“The nurses tell me you’ve been wandering, Will,” Hannibal begins as he distributes cups.

“I was awake,” Will says with a small laugh to himself, “and wandering with purpose and good intentions.”

“Visiting that unfortunate young woman suffering from delusions,” Hannibal says as he fills their cups with green tea from Zhejiang Province.

“She’s my support group,” Will retorts.

“And I hope you’re hers,” Hannibal replies. “Nothing more isolating than mental illness.”

Will stops eating and puts his spoon down. He sits back and allows apprehension to appear in his eyes. Still refuses to accept the diagnosis.

“The hallucinations, the, ah, loss of time, the sleepwalking,” Will ventures. “Could that have all just been the fever?”

“Fevers can be symptoms of dementia,” Hannibal says with a glance up at Will to gauge his reaction.

Will nods and smiles the false smile meant to hide his fear and anger.

“Dementia can be a symptom of many things happening in your body or mind that can no longer be ignored, Will,” Hannibal explains.

Will’s smile turns desperate as he tries not to crack. “Does Jack know?” he asks.

“That this could be more than a fever? No,” Hannibal answers with a shake of his head. “I haven’t told him.”

Will blinks, suddenly confused. “Shouldn’t you?”

“Not until we know for certain,” Hannibal answers. “What we must do now is continue to support and monitor your recovery.” He pauses. “This young woman you were visiting – how’s her recovery?”

Will sips tea and shakes his head, grateful for the subject change. “I don’t think she wants to recover. She’s afraid to remember what she did.”

Hannibal blows on his tea. “Can’t say I blame her,” Hannibal replies with a glance at Will.

Will sniffs in agreement. He dips his spoon back into the soup and they eat in silence while Hannibal waits for Will to ask the other question pressing on him.

He doesn’t put his spoon down or sit back this time. Instead, he asks over the soup in a low tone, “What happened last night?”

“What do you remember?”

“I came to your house,” Will starts uncertainly. “I thought I had Garret Jacob Hobbs with me…”

With a glance, Hannibal encourages him to continue.

“I know that’s not possible.” Will’s eyes sweep down Hannibal’s lapel. He shakes his head and closes his eyes, setting the spoon aside. After a moment, his eyes shift back to Hannibal’s. “If I had someone with me and I wasn’t sure who it was… I would have gone to you for only one reason.”

Hannibal takes his cue. “You did come to my house,” he says as he dabs his lips with a napkin. “You thought Garret Jacob Hobbs was with you, but you came alone. Jack tells me you found Abel Gideon earlier several miles away.”

Will raises his eyebrows, then narrows his eyes. Hannibal sees the spark of memory. “If I thought Gideon was Hobbs…”

“You wanted to know what was real,” Hannibal supplies. “You became upset when I told you Hobbs wasn’t with you. You had an episode.”

Will nods along with Hannibal. “I don’t know if I… lost time… or if it was a hallucination…” Will sips his tea again and stares into space. “It felt different.”

“With a temperature as high as yours was, hallucinations and confusion are common.” Hannibal studies him. “You seemed awake and aware but confused. I assumed you were hallucinating about Hobbs. I tried to get you to go to a hospital, but you got away from me.”

Will’s eyebrows jump. “I got away from you?”

“I went to call Jack,” Hannibal answers. “You were gone when I got back.” He pauses, glancing up and down at Will. “You took my car.”

Mortification passes momentarily over Will’s face.

Hannibal chuckles. “I suppose I shouldn’t have shown you where I keep the keys.”

Will sniffs and shakes his head. “I’m sorry I took your car,” he says, disbelieving mirth dancing at the edge of his face. “It’s okay?”

“You’d know if it wasn’t.”

A half-smile graces Will’s face as he finishes the soup. Will sits quietly while Hannibal packs up the dishes. When he’s done, Hannibal glances from Will to the bed. Will rolls his eyes but gets up, not without some effort, and pads back to the bed.

“You’ll rest?” Hannibal asks perfunctorily.

Will’s lip curls petulantly but he nods.

“Whether I want to or not,” Hannibal hears Will mutter as he lets himself out.

His back to Will, Hannibal smiles. More turns in this relationship he could not have foreseen. How interesting. How fun. Will continues to provide such entertainment. Hannibal is tempted to turn back and kiss him goodnight to see what he would do. But there’s still time for that. He’ll wait for Will to come to him. He won’t have to wait long.

The afternoon drags on as Will shuttles from uneasy sleep to uncomfortable wakefulness and back. When he’s awake, he tries to think. Sutcliffe. Who did Georgia see? But he can’t stay awake. And for all that he’s told to rest, he can’t do that either. Not with the constant interruptions.

Around mid-afternoon, a different doctor bothers him with an examination of his leg. Will sits and watches as the doctor probes his scar and asks too many intrusive questions. He’d buried the memories and gotten used to ignoring the scar. In the shower, it registered only as a thick, red gash on his leg. No dreams of dying in… a month?

Now, though, with his pants around his knees and someone he doesn’t know touching him – now memories dredged from the sediment in his mind haunt him. Lying bleeding on the pavement. The ease of letting go. He didn’t fight like he should have. He gave up too easily. And then the goddamn helplessness and uselessness. Hannibal was a bright spot in all of it, but when Will thinks of how many times he’s cried in front of Hannibal, he has to stop himself from squirming under the doctor’s scrutiny.

Could be an infection deep inside the wound. The doctor wants to do a scan.

Will chafes at the idea, having had too many scans lately, but keeps his mouth shut. He nods and the doctor leaves him with his memories.

Last night still nags him. Hannibal was helpful but something still isn’t right. Something feels off. He remembers disconnected fragments he can’t assemble. Some of the pieces seem solid but most spark in his peripheral vision only to fade when he tries to look directly at them.

He's tired and irritable when they take him to for the scan. Everything is bright and loud, intensifying the already intense headache he can't get rid of. He snaps and snarls at everyone who comes near him. Eventually, he covers his eyes with his arm and manages to fall asleep and jerk awake twice before he's returned to his room.

Jack's waiting for him there with arms crossed.

Will blinks tiredly at him. "Wondered when you'd show up."

Jack waits, shifting his hands to his hips, while the orderlies to do their work and leave. He surprises Will by sitting in the chair next to the bed. Where Alana sat last night.

Jack's stern face breaks and he laughs at Will. "I wanted to chew you out for leaving the vehicle," he begins. He throws up his hands. "But you caught him." Jack leans forward in the chair. "What made you get out of the car?"

Will blinks a few times. The direct question jogs his memory and he suddenly knows the answer.

"I saw movement near the tree line."

"You could fly an F-16 with that kind of vision," Jack says skeptically.

Will shrugs a shoulder, remembering what he'd been thinking, too. "I saw movement. You didn't see it. I thought it might be Gideon."

Jack inclines his head at the soundness of the explanation before his face darkens. "You didn't call me."

Will closes his eyes. He's wondered why he didn't call Jack – or whether he did and didn't remember it. If he had Gideon with him… But he knew Gideon might target Alana… And then there's Hobbs.

Will settles on a safe answer. "I wanted to make sure it was him."

"By yourself?" Jack asks with incredulous anger. "Sick as a dog?"

"I wasn't thinking straight," Will admits.

"You don't need to think to remember your training," Jack growls.

Will props himself up on an elbow. "What are you implying, Jack?" he asks angrily.

"I'm not implying anything," Jack responds. "I want to know why, if you found him right away, you didn't call me."

Will rolls his eyes. "I don't know. What do you want me to say, Jack?"

Jack fixes him with a stare. "Will," he says quietly. "You were gone for an hour and a half. What happened?"

Will looks away. He takes his time to consider his answer.

“I don’t know why I didn’t call you,” he says. “I didn’t think of it.” He rubs his head. “My thinking was… unreliable.”

Jack looks at him, just barely keeping himself from chewing on his lower lip. Will sees the argument he’s having with himself about Will’s access to cases, and for a long moment, Will worries that this is it.

Eventually, the part of Jack that thinks he needs Will at all costs wins. “Get better, Will,” Jack says.

Will lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Jack still needs him, no matter how broken he is.

He lies back down and dissects the conversation he just had, turning over Jack’s version of events. There’s still so much time he can’t account for with any certainty. His thoughts drift away from him before he finds any answers. He dreams fitfully of Gideon melting into Hobbs, then reforming into Gideon. He feels like Hannibal is with him but he can’t see Hannibal. Alana’s there, too, vulnerable from all sides to attack. Will dreams that he’s frozen in place. Can’t move. Can’t kill Hobbs, can’t stop Gideon, can’t save Alana.

Helpless. Useless.

Hours later, Will is half-asleep when he hears the door open for the umpteenth time. He opens his eyes, expecting to see the day nurse bearing down on him with a thermometer. Taking shape instead is Alana, who’s smiling and holding a brown paper bag. Will smiles back and slowly sits up as she unpacks the containers.

“You and Hannibal are gonna spoil me,” Will says, his voice gravelly with sleep.

Alana pauses and glances at Will as he swings his legs over the side of the bed. “What delicacy did he bring you?”

“A Chinese version of chicken soup,” Will says with bemusement as he pulls the IV stand toward the table. “Supposedly medicinal.” He smiles wryly. “I think I insulted him when I called it chicken soup.”

Alana laughs. “Well,” she says, “you won’t insult me if you call this chicken soup – because that’s what it is.”

Will sniffs appreciatively as he sits across the table from her. He realizes as he takes up the spoon that he’s the only one eating.

Well. At least she’s sitting with him.

“Thank you for bringing this,” Will says as he looks from her face to a distant point over her shoulder.

Alana returns his smile. He catches a glimpse of what might be regret – but it could just be the angle.

“It’s the least I could do,” she says.

Will hears wistful tenderness in her tone. He isn’t sure how he’s supposed to feel about that. At first, he feels buoyant in spite of himself. Too quickly he tumbles into despair as he remembers he woke up claiming to have shot Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Dementia. Latin for madness. A gradual loss of cognitive ability leading to the eventual erasure of identity. No sense of time, place, or self. A drooling madman. A lunatic moaning at the wind.

“How are you doing?”

Will blinks. Alana doesn’t seem troubled; he could call what just happened a daydream or wandering attention or any number of things.

Fever. Could still be the fever. Even if Hannibal doesn’t think so.

Will offers a half-shrug and returns to the soup. “They’re still telling me it’s in an infection, ah… but they don’t know what’s causing it. They gave me antibiotics. Waiting to see if they work, I guess.”

Alana nods. Will reads in his peripheral vision that she’s not satisfied with that answer but wants to respect his privacy. He’s always appreciated that.

“The dogs are doing well,” she volunteers. “A little stir crazy.”

Will’s lip quirks in a sad smile as he nods. “I haven’t been there for them enough lately.”

Alana sits back in the chair. Will half senses in her posture, half sees in her eyes that she has a suggestion for him. When Jack makes that move, Will gets heartburn. When Alana makes it, far more interesting things happen.

“You could take a few days off,” she suggests. “Maybe a little longer. Spend some time with them.”

Will nods. “I might do that,” he says noncommittally. He should – and he knows it. His body’s screaming at him to take her advice.

But Georgia Madchen didn’t kill Sutcliffe or herself. He has to work on it before he takes it to Jack. He needs evidence. He won’t rest easily until he finds something.

He sighs to himself and notices for the first time the soup he’s been eating.

“No black bones this time,” he mutters to himself without thinking. They were a little creepy.

He notices Alana’s questioning expression and adds, “The chicken Hannibal used to make soup had black skin and bones. I didn’t know such a thing existed.”

Alana laughs. “Hannibal enjoys doing that to people he likes.”

Will half-smiles. “What has he served you?”

Will watches her remember. Fondness fills her face. The darker part of him wonders if she and Hannibal have ever been more than friends. Instantly, jealousy snaps and snarls in his chest. He turns his full attention to the soup, trying not to shake with sudden jealous rage he can’t explain.

“The meats are the strangest. I think I’ve had almost every kind of organ meat eaten by people,” Alana says. “Have you had sweetbreads?”

A memory of Hannibal placing a colorful plate of sweetbreads and strange vegetables in front of him with a flourish calms Will. That was only a month ago. He’d been teaching then but not back in the field, and he’d been going to Hannibal almost every other day. That night, after dinner, they’d ended up in Will’s room and…

“Softer than I expected them be,” Will says, forcing himself to visualize the thymus and pancreas of lamb. “And so much more delicious.”

He thumbs mentally through the strange things Hannibal has served him and doesn’t try to stop the overlay of mutilated corpses that accompany each organ. “Tripe?”

“Once,” Alana answers. “It was also delicious.” She shudders slightly. “I wish I hadn’t looked up what it was later.”

Will nods with a small laugh and feels himself calming down again. “I made that mistake, too.”

Alana smiles at him. “Black-boned chicken. I haven’t had that.”

Will sniffs. “Seems almost normal now.” Suddenly curious, he glances at Alana. “How long have you known him?”

Alana thinks. “More than ten years,” she answers. “He was my mentor at Hopkins.”

Will nods. Makes sense. And that’s plenty of time for them to have –

Will focuses on scraping the last spoonful out of the plastic container. Whatever prior relationship they’ve had isn’t his concern, he tells himself. And anyway, it’s just a sense he has. His senses have been so off lately that he shouldn’t trust them.

But they’re all he has.

Will shoves his thoughts aside as he puts the spoon down. “He must have been good at that.”

Alana nods. He sees in her face that she’s noticed his distraction. She’s curious but not willing to ask; she considers it prying. He’s grateful again for her restraint.

“He was.”

Will nods to himself. A comfortable silence settles between them. Pleasant moments with Hannibal play before him and he feels good.

Alana looks ready to say something else when the night nurse, a new one tonight, opens the door. He smiles and politely tells Will to get back in bed. Will glowers, realizing that this new nurse might not be as lenient as he'd supposed.

Alana glances apologetically at Will, who rolls his eyes in return. Will watches her leave, then lies awake and wonders what she was going to say.

A few hours later, the back of Will's mouth tastes of burnt flesh as he lies in bed and stares at the ceiling.

He's certain Georgia didn't kill herself. Absolutely certain. But the evidence. The damning evidence.

He's got to get back to work. Jack's words less than an hour ago return to him.

I don't want to see you until you're better.

That was Jack's way of sending him back to his room. He'd lingered until the team started packing the remains, plenty long enough to fight the sensation of flames licking against his skin.

Horrible way to die.

Seared flesh clogs his nose. Will swallows heavily.

She wasn't wearing her grounding bracelet. She had to have known why she was supposed to wear it.

Do you know how many times I've been told I could recover with treatment? They said I might remember what I did. But I don't wanna remember.

Will shivers under the blanket. He knows she could do it. Knows she's thought about it. Because he knows how she feels: misjudged and persecuted but unable to trust herself enough to fight against it.

No. She had more fight in her than that. She didn't kill herself.

He just needs proof. He needs to get back to work.

Will rubs a hand over his eyes, wishing he weren't so restless. It's the fever. It went back up again. The new nurse told him that. Restless because of fever.

Restless because Jack has the wrong idea. Because Georgia isn't who he thinks she is.

Will's mind flits to Abigail and he sees himself *standing in the BAU with Nick Boyle's corpse hopping off the table. He stabs Nick in the gut, twisting the knife – and then Abigail – no, how*

could it be, not her – Abigail is stabbing him in the gut. Betrayal burns his heart.

Will forces himself to concentrate. That isn't why his mind went in that direction. It went to Abigail because Jack was not entirely wrong about her. Wrong that she helped her father, yes, but not wrong about Nick Boyle.

Goddammit Jack.

Will curls up on his side and puts a hand to his head. He can't think like this. When the nurse brings him pills, he swallows them without noticing the extra one. Fifteen minutes later, he wonders why he's suddenly woozy for a full minute before he realizes what happened. He has just enough time to wonder if he should be angry with the nurse or Jack or both of them before he slips into medicated sleep.

Dreams lurch drunkenly from Hobbs and Gideon and Alana to Georgia and Jack. The vague sense of Hannibal watching pervades each one. He returns again and again to a strong sense that he needs to wake up.

He needs to wake up because Georgia's waiting under the bed. He feels himself trying to wake up. He's at Hannibal's house. Hannibal's telling him he has a fever, Garret Jacob Hobbs isn't here. He needs to wake up so he can find Hobbs and kill him. So he can keep Alana safe.

He needs to wake up.

The dream vanishes. For a while, so does he.

Then he's asleep in his bed with the dogs nearby. A sense of Georgia's presence wakes him. He lifts his head to see her standing in his living room – not as the woman he's come to know but as the delusional killer he had to save.

She wants to show him something. Something he has to see. Something that will answer his questions.

He hears her whisper these things to him like a ragged Siren. He follows her call, sitting up and sliding the covers off of his body. He gets to his feet and follows her outside as though he's in a trance. The bare boards of the porch chill his feet.

She smells of illness. Madness.

But she knows. She *knows*.

"See?" she says. Then, beseechingly, "See?"

Antlers pierce her chest. As Will stares, she bursts into flames. Will watches with confusion, terror, and fascination as she turns to a column of fire only to transform into the stag. Antlers on fire. The stag shakes his massive head, tossing fire into snow.

And then Will knows, and his eyes fly open and he recognizes the dull colors of the hospital room as his pulse hammers in his head.

Someone murdered her. Maybe something to do with Hobbs, he isn't sure. But she was murdered.

Will's mind burns with clarity and motion as he sits up. In the incandescence of his thoughts and the bodily sensation of having been chewed up and spat out, he feels that the fever has left him. Will swings his legs off of the bed and picks the tape off of the IV so he can slide it out of his vein. Shedding his shirt, he uses it to staunch the bleeding while he grabs the two unopened bundles that contain his regular clothes. He's grateful for Hannibal's thoughtfulness as he kicks his pants off and gets into the shower.

Everything makes sense now. He feels it deeply, the certainty that she was murdered. Even better, he knows he'll find evidence. Now that he can think, he'll be able to fill in the details so they can catch her killer.

Georgia and the stag on fire. The stag has always been about Hobbs in some way. Memories and associations play like a symphony at the edge of his awareness, permitting him to think with ease over the sound.

But he needs the evidence. Who would kill Georgia? Why make it seem like a suicide?

Will thinks as he dries off and dresses. It feels so good to think again. It's control. Power. He feels better than he's felt in a while. At least a week.

Will is putting his watch on when the nurse comes in. He has to wait on the form to sign himself out and then the insurance paperwork. He leaves the signed papers on the bed and lets himself out before anyone can stop him.

By the time Will makes it back to Wolf Trap, it's past 7 a.m. The dogs are happy to see him. He gives them less attention than any of them, himself in particular, would prefer before he feeds them a generous breakfast, scrounges something for himself, and locks the door behind him without a second thought.

He's got work to do.

This Will Destroy You

Will sits in his car outside Hannibal's house and tries to clear his mind. All day, while the Copy Cat's victims crowded him, the small part of him sheltered from violence thought about coming here. When he called to ask about having dinner, he could hear in the timing of Hannibal's reply and the subtle hitch in his voice that they have the same goal tonight. His blood stirs just thinking about it. He's timed coffee and aspirin perfectly.

Oddly nervous about the whole thing – it's been a while, so much as changed – Will takes a deep breath before he gets out of the car. Jitters from the caffeine, that's all. Except, he hears a voice say, the last time he was here, he did things he can't remember.

Clear mind, clear mind, he tells himself. His breath ices the air in as he walks quickly to the door. Kicking the snow off of his shoes, he checks his watch. Exactly on time.

Hannibal opens the door before Will can knock.

"Good to see you looking well, Will," Hannibal says with a smile.

Will relaxes instantly. Hannibal's normal. No different.

Nothing more isolating than mental illness.

But he's not isolated. He has Hannibal. Gauge. Anchor. Rock.

Even better, Hannibal looks lively. Not quite excited – outside of sex and cooking, Hannibal doesn't express excitement – but animated in a way Will hasn't seen in a while.

Warmth blossoms in Will's chest. "Good to feel better," he replies with a shy smile as he steps inside and takes his jacket off.

Hannibal takes Will's jacket and says, "I'm just about to put the quail in the oven."

More birds. Remembering his conversation with Alana – *Hannibal enjoys doing that to people he likes* – Will asks, "What's special about the quail?"

Hannibal smiles again as he leads Will into the kitchen. He's happy with himself. Happy Will is here. The warmth spreads to Will's belly. Any lower and he'll have to do something about it.

"Nothing in particular," Hannibal says. He glances over his shoulder at Will. "No black bones this time."

Will smiles sheepishly. Hannibal quirks a half-playful lip. There's a twinkle in his eye. Then it comes to Will: the dinner party Hannibal had a while ago. Right after the Ripper re-appeared. That's when he last saw Hannibal this pleased.

Will's stomach clenches: Hannibal's pleased because of him. Hannibal missed him. Him. Stable-enough-for-now Will Graham who can be a good lover and a decent companion.

He's missed sex, too, surely. Will wonders idly if Hannibal has dreamt about him or fantasized about him. He rakes possessive eyes over Hannibal and sees the answer in his expression, comportment, choice of dress: *yes*.

This is serious.

Anxiety flutters in Will's chest. He tamps down the urge to flee. Trying to cover the tremor in his hands, he leans casually against the sink, shoves his hands in his pockets, and watches Hannibal with exaggerated interest.

"The duxelle of mushrooms makes it special," Hannibal says, lifting the skin of one of the birds to reveal a nearly black mixture. Will looks on with an appreciative expression. He listens as Hannibal describes the combination of wild mushrooms, nodding his head when it seems appropriate, doing his best not to dwell on the panic beating itself to death against his ribcage.

"Farm raised?" Will asks, remembering of a sudden that when he was a boy, his father hunted quail. Fried quail. Chewy and gamey. Hannibal's quail will be tender and clean.

Hannibal answers with the name and location of the farm and Will sees a glimmer of pride and satisfaction he knows well. He feels it every time he eats a fish he's caught. An image of Hannibal dressed in camouflage hunting quail flashes before Will. As he stifles a laugh, the image detours down the avenue of fantasy and suddenly he's on his knees amid leaves and twigs with Hannibal in front of him, slicked and ready, looking back over his shoulder with an expression that says *now*.

Will's blood stirs, urging him forward. This has to happen or he won't be able to stand the tension and gnawing nervousness. So, before he can think better of it, he steps closer to Hannibal and pins him against the kitchen island, gently but insistently kissing his jugular. As Hannibal tilts his head back, Will leans into him and feels him enjoy the attention. Hannibal pulls Will's hips into his own and claims his lips until they're both breathless.

When they pause, Hannibal nudges Will back with a leonine smile. He studies Will for a moment in a way that makes him feel like he's the center of the universe, then turns toward the stairs to the wine cellar.

Catching his breath, Will adjusts himself in his pants and stretches his arms and legs. Hannibal wants a slow build-up. He wants to savor tonight. This experience matters to him – maybe not the way some rare delicacy or masterful performance matters – but it matters nonetheless. A head rush makes Will giddy. He shakes with silent laughter as the room dances around him, then eases into quiet contentment.

This. He missed this.

Whatever this is. Not that it matters.

Will takes a deep breath and tells himself to follow Hannibal's lead and savor the pleasures of the flesh. He ignores that growing sense of warmth in his chest that tells him this is more serious than it was before.

It's just flesh. Just fun. Just friends. Not anything more than that.

When Hannibal reappears with a bottle of Quinta do Noval 2011 Nacional Vintage port, Will is gazing placidly at nothing. He gently scrutinizes Will while he pours a glass for each of them.

"Forgive my curiosity, Will," Hannibal ventures. "May I ask what the diagnosis was?"

Will stares for a moment longer at empty space before he glances at Hannibal and shrugs. "Ah, infection," he says, accepting the glass of wine gratefully. "They gave me antibiotics."

Hannibal scents and sips the port, waits a moment, and says, "I understand you left against medical advice."

Will rolls his eyes. "I've felt fine all day. No fever. The antibiotics must be working."

Hannibal nods slightly. "As long as you're satisfied."

He begins mixing ingredients Will is fairly sure he can pick out – radicchio and endive because they're in season, some type of crumbly cheese, walnuts, and something else that looks like dried fruit. Will sips the wine and does his best to analyze it so that he might have something to say later about it or about how it compliments the food.

In the back of his mind, he realizes that he's trying too hard. In the fore of his mind, he watches Hannibal's graceful, elegant hands with absolute attention. Hannibal's delicate, knowing hands.

Feeling himself flush as blood rushes to his groin, Will swallows too much wine and chokes. He waves off Hannibal's concerned glance and is grateful when Hannibal lets it go.

"You've been working," Hannibal observes after he washes his hands.

Will shrugs and looks down at the pristine floor. "It was… ah… Georgia Madchen – my support group – she, ah… died."

Hannibal nods with understanding but no affect. Will needs half a moment to do the math.

"Jack called you," Will says flatly.

Hannibal relishes another sip of port before exhaling softly. "Jack was worried."

His gaze shifts to Will's and there's the controlled compassion and care Will has become so accustomed to seeing. He has to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Hannibal's sincerity doesn't permit it.

“As am I.” Hannibal’s dark eyes bore into Will’s like he’s taking the measure of Will’s soul. “It’s painful to lose a person to whom you have made a connection.” He pauses, his gaze back on the wine glass. “And in such a horrific manner.”

A vision of Georgia bursting into flames flashes in front of Will’s vision. He hears screaming: hers or his own, he can’t tell. Nor does it matter, for her terror is his. A black hole of fear from whose gravitational pull there is no escape.

A slight twitch of his right hand is the only betrayal his body visits upon him.

“Talk about it later,” he mumbles into the glass.

“Of course,” Hannibal concedes. “My apologies.”

Always chivalric, always willing to dismiss a subject immediately if it makes Will uncomfortable: that’s Hannibal. And yet, that small voice in the back of Will’s mind says, Hannibal brought it up.

Will takes a deep breath and a long drink of wine. So what if it’s an obvious retreat into alcohol. Tonight is not about work. Not about psychoanalysis. Not about anything but the two of them enjoying each other’s company.

He catches himself swaying. The wine is stronger than usual. A question about the vintage tumbles out of his mouth.

Hannibal lights up. “2011 was an exceptional year in Portugal…”

Will nods as Hannibal talks, paying just enough attention to extract the big picture. The rest of his attention he devotes to the kitchen as he tries to remember whether anything happened here the other night. His memory is blank, like the absence of color. That has to mean nothing happened here. He remembers fragments of the dinning room and the foyer but nothing of the kitchen.

“…late August rain…”

Will stands without thinking and wanders toward the dining room. He doesn’t hear Hannibal follow him but he’s not surprised when Hannibal appears at his side. Will stands looking toward the back door with the fireplace to his left. He stood like this that night. His body remembers, oriented in time and space regardless of where his head was. A sheen of sweat springs from nowhere as though he’s back in the throes of fever, and his head – he can feel the headache waiting behind his eyes and at the base of his neck, kept at bay only by aspirin. The room swirls for a moment. He stood here and spoke to Hannibal and –

Whorls of color. Light. Noise. Desperation. Fear. Panic and sweat and cordite.

Will screws up his face and squints. He can almost see what happened. He thinks he sees Hobbs, but it’s like looking through a rainy window at a Monet: all streaks and blurs.

He hears the slightest rustle of fabric as Hannibal puts a hand on his shoulder. “It may come to you in time.”

Will blinks through the disappointment. “I thought it might help if I saw the room.”

“There was always that chance.”

Will nods and turns back to the kitchen, trying to keep his shoulders from sagging. He perches on a stool, sips the last of the wine, and avoids Hannibal’s eyes.

“You were saying about rain in August?” he says softly to the counter.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow as he refills their glasses: you were listening?

Caught, Will demurs. He fidgets with the stem of the glass. “Sometimes, I like hearing you talk,” he mumbles.

The eyebrow ticks up even more.

Will raises his own eyebrow in response, earning an amused half-smile from Hannibal.

“Then I shall talk.”

By the time Hannibal has dinner plated, Will has come up with only one topic of conversation: one of the many he wanted to avoid. But he has to ask. Has to know. It affects the plan slowly taking shape in the back of his mind.

“How’s Abigail?” Will asks as he tears the leg off of the bird with his fork. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

Hannibal pauses for the tiniest of moments to dab his lips. “I regret to say that she’s working with Ms. Lounds.”

Betrayal, hurt, and anger color Will’s neck and cheeks, constricting his chest, making him want to rage. “I see,” he says tightly as he tears off the other leg.

The tiny tinks of silverware on china don’t fill the space properly. An image of Hobbs flickers in Will’s peripheral vision. He forces himself not to look, sucking the meat from the bone instead and licking the trace of grease from his lips.

“I understand they have just begun to meet,” Hannibal says as he meticulously constructs a bite of duxelle on his fork. “There is still time to talk with her.”

Will’s eyes flash as he nods. Part of him wants to bring up Jack’s suspicions about her. He swallows more wine instead, his head buzzing as though circled by cartoon sparrows.

Tonight is not about their adoptive daughter. Not about Jack. Not about anything but the two of them being together again at long last. Will forks a fig and relishes the burst of flavor on his tongue as he will soon relish the salt and spice of Hannibal’s skin.

The rest of the meal passes in amicable silence. Emotions swirl inside Will, weaving drunkenly down the line of his associations, but he’s sated enough by wine and food to

lounge like a big cat and appreciate the assurance of sex with the man sitting across the table from him.

This might be happiness.

Hannibal doesn’t wait on the dishes.

He places his plate and silverware in the sink and turns to face Will, who’s settled an arm’s length away next to the kitchen island. Flushed with drink, Will leans back against it, his posture open and inviting, his body vibrating with barely-contained urgency.

But his eyes. Liquid and cool. Strung out on desire. No matter the pulse thrumming in his neck and subtle tremors in his hands: he waits for Hannibal to make the first move.

Hannibal gazes at him, searching his eyes for nothing in particular. Testing his patience. Provoking him. The impatient energy flowing from Will mirrors his own anticipation. His body urges him to crush Will against him until they're both lost in pleasure. He’s dreamt of Will several times this week, waking up needy and alone each time. But reticent Will showed more forbearance than Hannibal thought him capable of.

He shows remarkable restraint now, too. But he’s tuned to his breaking point. Soon he’ll snap.

Yet still Hannibal waits, reveling in the keen in his flesh for a taste of Will. He’s earth and water desperate for wind and fire. This passionate creature before him, this kindred spirit – for a moment, Hannibal wants to tell him everything.

Danger sparks in Hannibal’s gut and nestles next to simmering desire. Will has too much power over him. He has given too much of himself away to this unsteady, half-blind man. He lets none of his misgivings show on his face, though perhaps the animal part of Will notices a slight change in his breathing.

Hannibal sees in Will’s eyes a poignancy that says everything is coming to an end soon. Will knows already. He’s known for a long time. But denial runs deep. He must be shown.

With his body, he’ll show Will everything he can’t give voice.

After they stumble into what’s long been Will’s bedroom, Hannibal sets the tone: calm, slow, steady. He takes a leisurely hand to the left cuff of his white oxford, a style of shirt Will once admitted he quite likes to see on Hannibal.

While Hannibal slowly works on his shirt, Will’s fingers fly over his own. Always eager, always uncertain, Will wants to get to it quickly as though Hannibal might change his mind. Hannibal takes the time to study him. His skin is too pale in the lamplight when he pulls his undershirt over his head. He’s lost more than a few pounds to his illness already; his ribs are more pronounced and his muscles slightly less toned. But determination shines in his eyes and animates his impatient fumbling with belt, button, and zipper. Weeks of diminished

libido have left him terribly needy and so hard that Hannibal's blood retreats just a bit when he sees the painful strain of Will's full flesh.

Will may be desperate, but Hannibal still intends to take his time. He opens the other cuff while Will strokes himself, his eyes nearly black, all blown pupil.

Hannibal smirks to himself. He shouldn't smirk – this eagerness is Will's empathy mixed with too many days of celibacy and self-doubt – but he does anyway. He's rewarded as Will's eyes burn along the strip of flesh exposed by his parted shirt. Will's unguarded sincerity makes the gaze all the more flattering. Hannibal preens as he slides the shirt off of his shoulders, folds it neatly, and places it on the table beside the bed.

Will's eyes shine in soft light of the lamp as he takes in the striptease. He stares unabashedly as Hannibal gives himself the slight relief of a palm against his own straining erection before carefully unzipping his trousers. Will licks his lips, unaware of the tantalizing movement of his tongue. Hannibal smirks again to himself, enjoying the effect he has on Will, who's already weeping over the top of his hand.

Hannibal's pants pool around his ankles on the floor. Forgetting for once to care about wrinkles, he steps out of them, places a hand on Will's chest, and gently pushes him onto his back. Trust and need mingle in Will's eyes, forming a heady aphrodisiac.

Hannibal smiles and, for Will's benefit, sweeps his tongue over his lips before lowering his head to take in the first course.

Will can't stop the tiny intake of breath that escapes him as Hannibal's lips close around him. It's a beautiful sight to behold, this elegant, refined man taking him in with heat and pressure and utmost care. How he ended up with someone like Hannibal is beyond him. How he's managed not to alienate Hannibal is even more astounding.

Those thoughts and all others vanish as Hannibal begins to tease, sucking just hard enough test Will's control. Will claws at the duvet to keep his hands out of Hannibal's hair. His groin and sphincter contract and – oh, God, there. That. Just like that. He may speak the words. He doesn't know.

A tiny, constricted noise escapes him, barely audible over the moist sounds of lips and tongue. It's been so long. Hannibal's every move expands the nascent orgasm building low in his belly. For the first time, Will worries about lasting long enough to satisfy them both in the bone-deep way they desire.

As if sensing his concern, Hannibal falls back to licking and lightly sucking him. He shifts so he can toy with Will's overburdened scrotum. It would hurt if it didn't feel so good. Hannibal laps the liquid pulsing out of Will like warning spurts from a long-dormant geyser.

He's tasting. Discerning. Savoring. Because he likes to taste. The thought sends little shivers down Will's spine and more pre-come into Hannibal's waiting mouth.

Will closes his eyes and gives himself over to the feeling of Hannibal's talented tongue. It's just enough to give him some relief. Enough to make him want to buck into Hannibal's mouth for more. How easy it would be to let Hannibal suck him off, then fall into a deep sleep where he lies. How terribly tempting. He aches with tiredness.

But not tonight. Tonight is to be a feast of flesh.

Hannibal lingers, tonguing and tasting for a few more minutes before letting him go with a slick, hollow pop. When Will looks up at him, he's reading Will's face as he always does, checking for any sign that he should stop. Will grips his wrist lightly and runs a thumb along his radial pulse: more.

Taking the cue, Hannibal climbs on the bed and leans down to kiss him. Will tastes himself and wine and Hannibal, and he kisses back urgently. His hands find Hannibal's neck and pull Hannibal closer as he sucks Hannibal's tongue. Craving contact, he rolls his hips against Hannibal. Hannibal's free hand drifts down to squeeze Will's hip, then slides between Will and the bed to cup his ass. Asking. Wanting.

Will moans into Hannibal's mouth and runs a hand down to Hannibal's flank to signal a resounding yes, yes, yes.

Hannibal untangles himself and reaches for the lube while Will draws his knees up in a semi-sideways position that always reminds him frog dissection. He chases that intrusive thought away by focusing on Hannibal's luminescent skin. If only he could draw Hannibal like this, capture light shining as though it comes from within him. Hannibal himself is a masterpiece.

He thinks again about how lucky he is when Hannibal gazes at him like he's the work of art, then takes his worshipful place between Will's legs and lowers his head again. Hannibal's slick finger rings his anus, stoking the fire in his groin. What exquisite torture to be teased by a master.

When he finally slides a finger in, Will shudders. His fingers flex on Hannibal's shoulder nearly in time with the rhythm of one finger and then two. The world colors with tiny explosions as Hannibal crooks a finger to massage him. For a long moment, Will can do nothing but feel. Everything narrows to that glorious sensation and Hannibal's warm mouth secure around him.

Hannibal wants to give him everything tonight.

Yes.

As happens so often with Will Graham, what they do would be vulgar if it were anyone else. But Will rather likes to get on all fours and have Hannibal fuck him like an animal. It's part of the attraction. Perhaps it always has been.

Hannibal catches himself licking his lips in anticipation as he appreciates Will's primed, waiting ass. He teases again, running his cock along the slick slit. He pauses, poised to enter, takes a breath, and commits the moment to memory.

Perfect Will. His Will. C'est magnifique.

He dips in and feels Will try not to tense. A hand on Will's cock relaxes him. Slowly, Hannibal slides in, biting his lip at the tight heat. They do this too infrequently for Will to have adjusted to it. It's like the first time all over again. Hannibal strokes Will through the burst of pain, then revels in being buried.

Like being home.

He waits until Will calms, then slowly pumps into him, feeling resistance and constriction. Will's noises of pleasure and pain guide him. Slow at first. Light and not too deep. Hannibal stares at the scar on Will's right shoulder, a relic of his pre-FBI days. Will has said nothing about it, leaving Hannibal's mind free to roam. He imagines the knife thrusting in as Will screams. Bitter, metallic blood with a rich patina of fear. In his excitement, he pushes too hard, too fast. Will hisses and tenses, a fistful of sheet in his right hand.

Hannibal stops, buried in place, and runs his hands along Will's back to calm him. He leans forward to kiss the vertebrae between Will's shoulders and murmur encouragement. When Will relaxes beneath his ministrations, Hannibal resumes his slow pace and targets Will's prostate in spite of the difficult angle. He feels Will shudder beneath him and try his best to provide the resistance that makes their coupling a sweet agony.

Will can't stand the slow, shallow thrusts for long. He slides back against Hannibal, urging him to go faster, groaning when he does. Hannibal holds his hips and fucks him properly until Will writhes beneath him, gasping, begging him not to stop. Hannibal takes him close to the edge, giving him a taste of completion.

As he slows the pace to bring Will down gently, Hannibal listens intently to the tiny hitches in Will's breathing, his eyes fixed on the slight expansion and contraction of the scar. Will hangs his head between his shoulders and for a moment, Hannibal thinks he'll collapse onto the bed or ask Hannibal to finish him off. Checking himself out of the hospital early this morning, working all day: he's not in a fit state for the prolonged lovemaking session he wants.

But Will rarely disappoints. He shifts forward until Hannibal slips out and, to Hannibal's delight, slides on his knees to the headboard. Reaching up to grip it, he offers himself up in a backwards spread-eagle.

Something about the gesture is terribly endearing. Hannibal's heart tugs in spite of the flicker of danger.

Hannibal fits his body against Will's, tucking his cock safely in the cleft of Will's muscled ass. He slides his arms between Will's chest and the headboard, presses their bodies together, and kisses the back of Will's neck. Will's pleased in-suck of breath urges him on. With one hand, he fondles Will's cock; with the other, he tweaks a nipple and smiles when Will gasps. In Will's sweat, Hannibal scents the measure of the man. Passionate, dangerous Will. Perfect, magnificent Will.

Soon, he has Will begging breathlessly for more. Eager, wanting and needing as badly as Will, Hannibal rolls on a new condom, lubes up, and positions himself to fuck Will senseless against the headboard. Will sighs happily when he slides in. Hannibal envisions Will biting his lip. His knuckles are already white against mahogany.

Holding Will steady, Hannibal cants his hips and plunges in until he can't tell which noises belong to him and which to Will. The satisfying smack of the headboard against the wall breaks into his pleasure to remind him to check later for chipped paint.

When he stops for a break, softly stroking Will, he wonders idly if they can put a dent in the wall. Once they've caught their breath and Will straightens up for more, Hannibal grins wickedly to himself, determined to try his best.

Several minutes later, they lie side by side and catch their breath. Will hardly notices when Hannibal gets up. Lost in his own world of aching pleasure, Will is content to breathe and relax and cling to the sensation of being thoroughly claimed.

But his impatient cock urges him to take his turn. The soft padding of Hannibal's naked feet have him sitting up before he really wants to. He accepts a glass of water from Hannibal, whose front is red in a concave impression of Will's flushed back, and drinks greedily.

Hannibal watches. Will enjoys the eyes raking over his body. Hannibal knows him as no one else ever has or likely ever will.

Thirst satisfied, Will beckons Hannibal to lie down. He sits sideways next to Hannibal and traces a idle finger over Hannibal's toned abdomen while he soaks up the sight of Hannibal arrayed before him, ready for anything Will wants to give or take.

Will feasts on Hannibal from head to toe, his fingernail titillating the sensitive flesh just above Hannibal's groin. Then Will's gaze shifts to meet Hannibal's. Will stares at him with wicked determination, the corner of his mouth turned up in a devious half-smile.

Hannibal reads his intention to conquer and sees in his eyes everything he could be if he turned this volition on the swine in his life. Hannibal reaches up to kiss him. Will responds passionately, giving of himself without reservation. Half draped over Hannibal, Will runs a hand along Hannibal's flank, stopping to tease a nipple. After a moment of teasing the skin along Hannibal's ribs, Will bends down to kiss down Hannibal's chest and stomach, stopping again to tongue Hannibal's abdomen. He strokes Hannibal just enough to release some pressure, then lowers his head and laps up the evidence.

Hannibal closes his eyes and smiles again to himself. Will remembers all of his training.

Once Will has reciprocated the prostate massage and made Hannibal squirm beneath him, he releases Hannibal's swollen cock and stretches his jaw while Hannibal sits up. Will glances mischievously again at Hannibal and reaches for a condom. Hannibal runs his fingernails along Will's back, stopping him from his mission for a moment. He's finally learned to savor every touch.

The long gazes and idle touches tonight – this is the most sensual Will has been with him. Perhaps he's turning a corner. Perhaps he's ready to become something wonderful and new.

Will's determined eyes don't leave Hannibal's as he rolls on the condom and lubes himself with expert hands. Knowing Will's preferences, Hannibal lies on his back and slips a pillow under his hips. He's missed this assertion of dominance from Will. Beautiful, perfect Will.

Will positions himself over Hannibal and leans down to suck a nipple while he teases Hannibal with knuckle and thumb. Hannibal exposes his neck, pressing his head against the mattress, and rewards Will with genuine, unsuppressed noises of delight. He feels Will's cock on the rim of his anus as Will moves up to worship his neck. He marshals his control to stop himself from pushing his hips forward, so eager is he to be filled.

Calculated torment from Will Graham: Hannibal moans plaintively aloud and then into Will's mouth when Will hushes him with a kiss.

How did he allow Will so much power over him? Will nips at his jugular and Hannibal squeezes Will's hip and tangles a hand in his hair, because right now nothing matters but the pleasure Will orchestrates for him.

After many long, tantalizing moments, Hannibal hears himself whimpering pleas for satisfaction.

Will releases Hannibal's neck and pulls back, his eyes glimmering with passion. With equal parts care and intensity, Will shoves into him.

Hannibal gasps once, harshly, then sighs as Will fills him and a sense of being whole floods his perception. When Will begins to move, it's as though the stars have aligned. Hannibal arches into him and lets himself be taken as Will pleases. He struggles to breathe around the sensation of completeness. How he missed this. How he missed Will.

At length, the haze of fulfillment fades enough for him to participate. He slams into Will, timing his thrusts with Will's until they're both nearly undone. He wants to pluck this moment from the ravages of time and memory, and keep it safe always so that he might return as he wishes. Later he will do just that, meditating on his sensory memories until they occupy an opulent room in the Will Graham wing of his memory palace. For now, he feels every touch, hears every breath and gasp, scents the dominance wafting off of Will amidst the smell of their lovemaking. He tastes little else but Will and watches, mesmerized by the tortuous pleasure on Will's determined face, the bounce of his curls, the flush and sweat and effort enlivening his skin.

Will manages a quick, steady pace longer than Hannibal expects, then shoves into him and stops with a suppressed moan. While he catches his breath, Hannibal touches him gently in his favorite places: the xiphoid process below the sternum along the protrusion of his rib cage, the pulsing ulnar artery in his arms, clavicles to manubrium to trachea and heaving hyoid. He sweeps thumbs along the scratchy triangular plane of Will's jaw and up to the cartilage of his ears, so much like pink opening of a conch, then slips into Will's wet hair, tucking damp curls behind his ears. He fingers temples and forehead and then must sit up to kiss him.

With one hand on Will's ass and the other braced behind him, Hannibal guides them back until he's against the headboard, sitting on Will, who has somehow managed not to slip out. Understanding his request, Will kisses Hannibal's neck again until he's gotten his breath back. Then he pulls away, his eyes shining, and reaches up to rake Hannibal's hair over his forehead. Will likes it best when he doesn't put anything in his hair and it falls in a fringe over his forehead, just as it did months ago when Will first came to his home skittish and afraid after sleepwalking into the police. Will smiles and Hannibal sees in his eyes the emotion he knows Will sees in him: a patient, abiding love.

Perhaps a tear escapes the corner of Will's eye. Perhaps it's sweat. Hannibal catches the droplet with a knuckle and presses it to his lips like it's holy water. Will's eyes shimmer. He blinks hard and Hannibal knows it wasn't sweat he caught. Hannibal's chest constricts as a lump rises in his throat.

He's relieved when Will buries his head in his neck and kisses his clavicle lightly. Hannibal runs a hand through wet curls and kisses Will's crown. The droplets that escape his eyes and run down his cheeks can't be mistaken for sweat. He hears Will's shaky breath, then hears himself echo it.

What has this man done to him.

It's a relief when Will grips his hips and bucks into him, slamming the headboard into the wall with a satisfying thunk. Cries issue from them both. Hannibal's throat hurts, but feels cleansed as he never has before.

God, Will.

When Will pulls his head back, his face and eyes are red, but the look of determination and dominance are back. He's ready to finish. Hannibal reaches back to grip the headboard much as Will did half an hour ago. He can feel Will's legs trembling with the effort of holding them both up, but Will persists, driving into him like he can go all night. Hannibal arches his back and lets his head bang against the mahogany. He allows himself to be much louder than he ordinarily would, needing every moment of release.

Will brings them both to a near-crescendo before his legs begin to buckle. Before they can give out, Hannibal stops him and pushes him onto his back, falling with him so Will stays tucked deep inside. Will eyes him wildly, panting, and grips his hips like a vice. Hannibal grasps Will's shoulders and they quickly find the rhythm that will take them tumbling together over the edge.

Hannibal meets Will's thrusts with equal intensity, aware that this is the same position they used for their first coupling. Will could hardly participate then. Not so now. Now, Will pounds into him like he isn't on the bottom. Hannibal moans at how well-matched they are. God, Will. God.

He hears Will getting close and feels his own orgasm rising past the point of no return. Will's eyes are squeezed shut, his head back and mouth open in rapturous pleasure. The veins in his neck bulge erotically and Hannibal can no longer resist. He takes himself in hand even as he tries to hold back as long as he can, feeling pleasure build and build and build. Will thrusts

once more and his cock jerks and Hannibal clamps down on him. He strokes himself once more and comes with a silent scream of pure ecstasy.

When the last of the load leaves him and he can breathe again, he lifts himself off of Will and collapses against the headboard in a boneless recline. Will's legs fall to either side. Hannibal watches him tremble as he comes down, feeling in his own body the same quiver of muscles worked to exhaustion and the sweet solace of release at long last.

He has just enough energy and coordination to fish a small towel from the table, wipe the sweat from his face, and toss it to Will. It lays untouched on Will's despoiled stomach for a few moments before trembling hands do a poor job of cleaning up.

The towel falls from Will's hand to the floor and Will rolls onto his side with a grunt. His heavy hand claps Hannibal just below the knee; Hannibal returns the gesture, placing a hand on Will's calf. His eyes drift to the still-red scar above Will's femur, the remnant of the event that started all of this. Hannibal shuffles down until he's also lying on his side, intending to lie still with Will until his liquid muscles solidify.

The air between them, though heady with sex, seems also to be filled with charged emotion neither of them cares to investigate or articulate.

Just this. Just lying here with Will, whole and complete and thoroughly loved. No questions. No thinking. Just mutual understanding and regard.

Will's hand relaxes on his leg as he gives in to much-needed sleep. Hannibal feels his whole body smile in response. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and allows himself to drift into sleep with beautiful, perfect, content Will Graham at his side.

Une Petite Trahison

Chapter Notes

> Season 2 nears! I'm doing my best to finish this fic before the premiere... so I can continue this AU in another fic in a write-along-with-the-show fashion. Only 3-4 chapters left. Yay!

Anxiety flutters in Will's stomach as the plane lifts off from the ground. The double whiskey he had for his nerves while Abigail used the bathroom tries to burn its way up his esophagus. He swallows reflexively as the plane banks right a few degrees too far for his comfort. The bite of his nails in his palms fails to ground him. He can't help but close his eyes, clench his jaw, and do the best he can to still the dread terror of falling out of the sky.

Swallowing heavily, Will tries fix a good memory in his mind.

Playing with the dogs. The field. Snowy. Sunlit. Walking with Alana. Eyes watching from the tree line. Dogs on alert – *no*.

He breathes through the sensation of being strangled. *Breathe. Breathe. Don't pass out.*

Fishing in the mountains. Clear rush of the stream. Warmth of the sun. Stag watching from the opposite bank – *no*.

Breathe.

The kiss on the cheek Alana gave him a few days ago. Her perfume. Her nearness. Her thanks.

But if I kill her like he would kill her – no, Gideon, stop.

A mechanical noise – panic bursts in his chest. By the time he realizes it's only the landing gear folding into the plane, adrenaline has vanquished any last shred of calm.

Alana, the dogs, whiskey – not strong enough. He concentrates on Hannibal instead as they gain altitude.

Without any specific direction on his part, the soft, emotion-filled face Will first saw last night fills his mind. Hannibal's genuine smile and watery eyes laid over rouge cheeks make him feel lighter. He breathes more easily, inhales sweat – god, Will can smell him as though he's back in the moment. He ducks his head into the shelter of Hannibal's shoulder and feels safe.

Will breathes in stale airplane air as the plane levels out. He realizes as his stomach unclenches that he's sweated through his shirts already. Silently, he curses flying.

Will chances a glance at Abigail. Glued to the window. Not much to see out there. Perhaps she expected to glimpse the monuments. He wonders if she's seen them or been to the museums. He's never toured the Mall himself.

Maybe they could do that together one day, he thinks – and everything shifts and her horrified face flashes in front of him as she *stabs him in the gut like he's an animal.*

Her blue eyes bore into his. *"I finally get it. I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't feel ugly when I killed Nick Boyle. I felt good. That's why it was so easy to lie about it."*

Will stares at her and feels completely understood. "Like you didn't do anything wrong."

Abigail fixes her inquisitive eyes on Will. "Feel like you'd done something wrong when you killed my dad?"

Will meets her gaze. "I felt terrified."

Her eyes widen.

"And then," Will continues, "I felt powerful."

He's looking at himself and when he blinks, he's Hobbs and he's in the kitchen that morning and he's holding Abigail tightly against him and whispering that it will all be okay. His quick slash is meant to be merciful. She'll go faster this way.

Lifeblood flies with the sweep of the knife.

Will opens his eyes to the sound of a beverage cart rattling down the aisle. Abigail is watching him openly.

"My dad didn't like flying either," she says matter-of-factly and returns to her study of the landscape below.

Will offers a tiny, worried nod. She doesn't mean to hurt. She's a smart young woman who's been through too much. But still he's stung by her comparison.

With a conscious effort, Wills turns his thoughts to the jumble of associations, intuitions, and conversations bouncing around his head about the Copy Cat. He'd felt so clear this morning. Sore, yes, but well-rested. Able to think. He rushed through breakfast – something that Hannibal must have found unsavory, he realizes with a small frown.

Two new boxes of evidence related to the Copy Cat accumulated while he was sick, and he spent the morning pouring over them. Most were files on Georgia Madchen as victim, but a few treated her as killer, and a few more dealt with Sutcliffe. Mere tidbits on Marissa Shuur and Cassie Boyle. Nothing on Hobbs. But in each of the Copy Cat's victims, save Georgia, he sees breadcrumbs in the way the crimes were executed. Interpretations of the work of other

killers. It's not just someone with inside knowledge, but someone skilled at killing. A craftsman. An artist. Someone who takes pride on his work. Someone who shows off.

I can't allow you to pull Abigail into your delusion.

Hannibal is suddenly beside him, speaking into his ear.

Will doesn't turn his head. *"But you didn't interfere. You let me take her. Why?"*

Hannibal merely smiles.

Will blinks rapidly, head pounding, heart in his stomach. Nothing about the way he left Hannibal's office feels right to him. He reaches for his aspirin and shakes two out of the bottle.

"You look a little pasty," Abigail says. "Maybe you shouldn't have checked yourself out of the hospital."

He regrets telling her about his illness and deflects quickly. What motive does the Copy Cat have aside from interpreting murders associated with him?

You believe this is personal?

"It would have been my mom's birthday next week." Abigail speaks over the Hannibal in his head. He flinches internally. "We were going to climb Eagle Mountain to celebrate."

First confusion, then muted regret and stoic sadness wash over Will like it's his own missed family event. He needs a moment to separate himself from Abigail's emotions.

"Highest point in Minnesota, but it's not really that high," she continues. The realization mitigates her mood, and it's easier to find that separation. "Less than three hours to summit. You can see Lake Superior from there."

As she looks over at him and her tone lightens entirely, Will can breathe again and be in his own skin.

He swallows nervously, not sure what's appropriate. Family behavior he's merely observed, not experienced.

"I could take you… if – if you want to go," he says awkwardly.

"I think it would just make me sad," Abigail responds, throwing a wall up between them again. "Some places are stained now. Some people, too."

Rejection hurts like a kick to the chest.

"I know I am," Abigail adds with a sigh. Her tone gets his attention. She does this, drops these ambiguous hints. As though he's supposed to guess at a secret she has.

Will takes a deep breath. He wishes, not for the first time, that he could clear his mind. Instead, the drone of the jet engine reverberates in his skull.

I think it would just make me sad.

I felt good. That's why it was so easy to lie about it.

Who are you? Will thinks as he glances surreptitiously at Abigail. This burden between them, whatever it is – whether she blames him for her father or for saving her; hates herself for killing Nick Boyle; or, worse, looks at him and sees her father – or whether it's just the awkwardness of coming to terms with each other – whatever it is, something has to give. Soon.

Will takes another deep breath and tries to relax in the comfortable first class seat. He thinks of Hannibal again. Hannibal's hand over his chest as they fell asleep together in his bed. He calms, and soon he's asleep.

Three hours later, Will's nerves jangle as Abigail opens the door to the cabin. She wants to tell him something, that much he's certain of. But she's either waiting to feel him out or waiting for something else. His pulse pounds as he climbs the stairs behind her to the antler room. Fear, terror, anticipation, desperation, and a desire to run away from it all waft off of her. The boundary between her emotions and his begins to erode.

"The Copy Cat knew your father well enough to know about this place," Will observes, wondering how well he knows her. For all the intimate knowledge he has of her father's psychosis, Abigail remains enigmatic.

"He felt like he knew my father," Abigail tosses over her shoulder.

Obvious deflection, but Will feels the tug of this place pulling him under, as though he's treading water and Hobbs has just grabbed his leg. He tries to stay focused. What is she hiding? Who is she protecting?

"I wanted to understand him," he says, first to her, then to himself. "I felt like I had to understand him."

Hobbs, zombie-like, appears in the corner of the antler room. He smiles. Will feels intensely that he's treading the same boards Hobbs did, breathing the same musty air, admiring the same fair-skinned daughter. He might burst at the seams. Inside, he feels Hobbs trying to crawl out of his flesh and finish the job.

Suddenly, Abigail turns to face him. "Do you ever hunt?"

Will blinks through an image of Hobbs in front of him, superimposed over the antlers. Willing him to do what he couldn't. Urging him to kill. To understand fully Garret Jacob Hobbs. To become him.

"I fish," he hears himself say.

“It’s the same thing, isn’t it?” she says. “One, you stalk. The other you lure.”

Hobbs beckons to him.

See? See?

He looks to Abigail and Will feels the air shift. Her. It’s always been her.

“Are you more fisherman or hunter?” he asks slowly.

“My dad taught me how to hunt,” she deflects.

No. No more half-truths. “No, that’s not what I’m asking,” he says, as he turns to face her. Hobbs rises inside of him, angry yet loving, desiring the completion of the kill.

Will looks into her eyes and knows the truth. Finally, the truth.

“All those girls your dad killed,” he says, bearing down on her, closing in until he can feel the fear wafting off of her, “did you fish or did you hunt, Abigail?”

She remains steady, her eyes wide as a doe’s. “I was the lure. Did Hannibal tell you?”

Betrayal knifes him in the back.

“As to why I couldn’t tell you…” Hannibal pauses. “How do you think it would have gone in Jack’s office if you’d known?”

Will stares at the flames, then looks down at his drink. “Anything else I should know about?” he asks stiffly.

“No,” Hannibal replies.

Will shakes with rage. Hannibal betrayed his trust. Hannibal betrayed *him*.

“No, he didn’t,” he says.

Hobbs flickers behind Abigail, smiling, his hand on her shoulder. The antlers surge toward Will and burst into flames.

“He said you’d protect me, you’d keep this a secret.”

The stag shakes his fiery antlers. Then Georgia – god, he smells her charred corpse, tastes death in the back of his mouth like curdled blood. Hobbs, still smiling, looks down at Abigail. It was her. It was always her. When Hobbs looks up, he morphs into Will. Will stares at himself, panting, crazed, needing to end it all.

With all his strength, Will grabs Abigail and impales her on the antlers. Just like Marissa Shuur. Her innocent doe eyes watch in shock. No, not innocent. Duplicitous. Eyes of a predator. A wolf in lamb’s skin.

“There is something wrong with you,” he hears her say. “I think you’re still sick.”

Awful foreboding panic claws at his chest. “Jack Crawford was right about you.” He barks a terrible laugh. The antlers close in again. “He knew. You killed Nick Boyle,” he says, anger and betrayal exploding in his head, “and you helped your father kill all those girls.”

“No, I didn’t help my dad kill anybody – ”

“No, you lured them,” Will says, advancing on her. “How many other people have you killed?”

“You think I’m the Copy Cat?!” Abigail yells, standing her ground. “You think I killed Marissa?”

“If you didn’t kill her, Abigail, then somebody you know did.”

“Ever think that somebody could be you?” she accuses. “You were there. You saw Marissa. You knew about this place and there is something wrong with you.”

The antlers pierce his head like a crown of thorns and suddenly he’s on fire. Orange and yellow flames lick his skin. The antlers press in tighter, piercing his skin, squeezing until he can’t breathe. Like a thicket closing in on a hunted rabbit, the bones crush his chest and skull. Blood roars in his ears and –

Someone’s talking in the distance. He feels himself trying to claw his way out of a deep, dark tunnel. He’s trapped. He can’t wake up. Can’t breathe.

And then light and the back of a seat in front him and a woman talking about passengers. He breathes and remembers and rejoins time.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, looking around at an empty plane, “where are we?”

“Dulles International, Virginia,” the flight attendant answers.

Abigail. Where is she?

“Was there a young woman traveling with me?” Will asks, trying not to sound frantic.

Her answer is drowned out by the blood rushing in his ears, the treacherous beat of his heart. No Abigail. The last thing he remembers is her accusing him of being the Copy Cat – right after he killed her. Hallucination. Wasn’t real. He remembers her accusation. But where did she go? What did he do between then and now?

Will scans the plane again. Empty.

“I’m sorry, sir, I have to ask you to leave now or I’ll have to call security.”

Will breathes and nods and lifts himself to his feet with the help of the seat in front of him. He begins to feel calm as he walks the narrow aisle to the gate. Numbness sets in before he leaves the terminal. Mechanically, he finds his car, drives home, and feeds the dogs. Numbness sits at the kitchen table and slowly drinks two fingers of whiskey while the dogs

yawn and bed down. Numbness lies awake staring at the ceiling until his eyelids fall shut and he begins to dream.

Feeling must not interfere with a precise cut. She deserves that much.

And so Hannibal feels nothing when he slashes Abigail's throat. His hand on her warm chin, holding it in place as the knife severs her carotid, grasps it still for a single second before she begins to collapse against him.

He lowers her to the floor as gently as he can in light of the need to replicate splatter patterns. On one knee, Hannibal takes her hand and looks into her wide, fearful eyes. For her noble sacrifice, she must feel loved in her final moments. He murmurs his paternal affection around her terrified gasps. Love and sorrow sting his eyes. As she fades, he kisses her bloody hand and encases it in his own.

She dies alone and fearful, no differently than anyone else. After her hand goes limp, Hannibal retreats into himself. He rests his head on his hand, bows it in reverence, and allows himself to feel everything.

His body reacts as it never has before, urging him to sob. He weeps instead, quietly, her hand cooling in his, until the sensation of sadness depletes itself.

When he finally stands, he wipes his eyes with a handkerchief and takes a final breath before banishing emotion. He has work to do. Emotion cannot interfere. The late afternoon sun came out as she died, casting weak light across the kitchen and her still, pale figure. Waiting on the counter, Hannibal's scalpel shines.

Fear and Trembling

It's nearly midnight when the plane carrying Dr. Brian Lenchelat and his precious cargo of organs ready for transplant lands at Dulles International. With a glance at an understanding flight attendant, he disembarks first. He's pleased to see that flights from two other Midwestern cities landed on time, giving him a sea of people into which he easily vanishes. He drives north to Sterling where he buys gas and three bags of ice from an older woman with the skin and teeth of a lifelong smoker and the tired eyes of a single grandmother working two jobs. If questioned, she will remember him but, having no desire to assist investigations, say nothing. The ice does its job until he transfers his selections to the harvest freezer in his Baltimore basement. He stows his credentials, cleans himself meticulously in the shower, and sleeps deeply for three hours.

Soreness lingers in his shoulders when he wakes. He lies still and, now having some distance from the event, meditates on the strong feeling of remorse he has for Abigail's ill-luck. He would have preferred such a different end for her.

At length, he gets up and turns his thoughts to the day ahead. Momentous though it will be, he selects his wardrobe and dresses as ever. His other preparations flow as they do always, honed over time into habit. From his second floor store, he selects a vial of halogenated ether and wraps it in a clean cloth. Propofol, vercuronium, an endotracheal tube, surgical gloves, and other supplies he packs around a thermos in a bespoke briefcase purchased many years ago in Milan.

Over an hour later, the Bentley slows to a quiet stop just beyond the hedge that hides Will's house from passersby. He's left himself a fair walk up to the porch. He turns off the car and sits for half an hour watching the house in the weak moonlight filtering through the trees. If Will stirs, he keeps the lights off.

It's nearly six a.m. when Hannibal squelches through mud to the porch. Before ascending the stairs, he stops and listens. Movement. Whining and dogs' nails scraping on the floor. Will's heavy footsteps. He slips up the steps and flattens himself against the wall. Uncoordinated thumps lumber toward the door and stop. The doorknob turns slowly. Will, dressed only in shorts and a t-shirt, lurches out the door, off the porch, and toward the woods.

The three dogs following him stop to sniff Hannibal. Offered sausages, two tarry with him. The one called Winston looks Hannibal over once then follows his master. Hannibal leads the others back inside, gives each dog a sausage, and turns on the overhead light in the kitchen. He inhales a potent fragrance of fear beneath a candied sweetness and heat as he unpacks his briefcase. Instruments laid out, he slips to the bed pauses for a moment to appreciate Will's still-damp pillow. Already Will fears he has succeeded where Hobbs failed.

Hannibal removes a bag containing small chunks of flesh wrapped in raw bacon. Six pairs of eyes follow his hand intently, but they know they must wait. Will has trained them quite well.

At length, he steps onto the porch, locates Will's figure in the distance, and begins walking.

Once he catches up with Will, he follows at a distance with measured curiosity. Will walks through the woods along a path worn from game trails and familiar to him. His faithful companion follows. Periodically, he stumbles in thorn patches.

Hannibal smiles to himself. Will is doing all the work for him.

They walk for ten minutes before Hannibal breaks a stick. Will stops abruptly, turns in his direction, and walks toward him. Same steady pace. Same lack of affect. In this way, Hannibal lures Will back to the house.

Once they reach the porch, Hannibal beckons him closer and waits until Will is within arm's reach to hold out the ether-soaked cloth. Will walks into it and Hannibal ducks around him in time to catch him as he slumps. He looks askance at Winston, wishing for a moment that dogs could open doors, before he hoists Will over his shoulder and carries him inside.

Hannibal wastes no time arranging his charge in a kitchen chair. He holds the cloth to Will's nose for two more breaths, then washes his hands. Winston follows him. The only witness. Hannibal eyes the dog as he rinses the soap from his hands. In certain situations, a dog like this one would be quite useful.

Back at Will's side, Hannibal gloves up and maneuvers Will's pajamas to his knees with clinical indifference. He cleans an injection site on Will's thigh that will be masked by scar tissue and pushes a dose of propofol. He counts the seconds as he draws vercuronium, then listens carefully as the anesthetic takes over and Will's head slumps further down his chest as his breathing changes. Hannibal takes his chin and pushes his head back to keep his airway clear. Will's skin is cold to the touch in spite of the fever he has.

Having ample time before he ought to administer the paralytic, Hannibal studies the scratches on Will's dirty arms and legs, hands and feet. The lack of tracks from door the bed could be a minor problem. Nothing is to be done about it, though.

Hannibal slips the second needle into another mass of scar tissue and pushes the paralytic. He pulls a chair up to Will's and listens carefully to Will's breathing, ready if he needs assistance. Slow, shallow breaths. Clear airway.

Hannibal runs a thumb over Will's smooth forehead. Curious, he takes Will's temperature. Not high enough to be dangerous; rather, right where it should be for the optimal combination of confusion and misery to distract Will when he wakes from the sense of having been drugged. He's sensitive to it, but he'll be too indisposed to notice.

Hannibal caresses Will's innocent cheek. Dear Will, he could do so many things.

Hannibal falls back to the chess matches he's planned out based on the actions Will is most likely to take when he wakes up. As he reviews scenarios, he splits his time between monitoring his patient and chastely touching the man who is so tantalizingly close to being his partner in every way.

Dear, sweet Will.

When it’s time, Hannibal assembles the devices he needs to do his work. His gaze lingers on Will for a moment longer. He will never be this innocent again.

Gloved, Hannibal holds the organ against Will’s nails and scrapes bits of tissue off. Will fights him when he slides the lubricated tube into Will's stomach. His eyes roll around in their sockets and his muscles try to jerk, but the paralytic keeps him still. Hannibal selects the shell of cartlige and nudges it along until it’s through the esophageal sphincter. Quickly, he pulls the tube up and out of Will's throat and listens as Will gasps for breath. His hands begin to twitch as the paralytic and sedative wear off. Hannibal picks him up again, carries him to his bed, covers him, and rights the kitchen.

As the sun rises, Will’s breathing changes and he passes from unconsciousness to deep sleep. Hannibal checks his airway one last time, turns out the light, and retreats to a chair near the door where he loads a syringe with ipecac. Light breaks into the room. As if on cue, Will’s breathing changes again. His muscles begin to twitch as Hannibal slinks toward him. In a dream state already. Fascinating.

Hannibal coaxes Will with soothing words, the ether-soaked cloth on the pillow next to Will in case it’s needed. Still under the waning influence of the sedative, Will follows the instructions to open his mouth and swallow. The clear syrup slides down his throat with relative ease.

Hannibal withdraws from the room and closes the door quietly behind him. He stays close and watches from an oblique angle as Will wakes, panting hard. He sits up and Hannibal watches his back as he notices his dirty hands and feet. The fear is palpable in his trembling body. Exquisite.

Will gets to his feet and stumbles deeper into the house. Hannibal turns his back, walks down the driveway, and lets the scene play out in his imagination.

A little over an hour later, Hannibal starts his car and drives from a secluded back road to the hedges and the fence and the long driveway. As soon as he clears the hedges, he sees Will sitting outside on the steps of the porch. He parks and steps into the muddy tracks he left not long ago.

Will’s distraught breathing is audible from several steps away. He doesn’t look up when he speaks.

“I… went to Minnesota,” Will says through ragged, frozen breaths. “I took Abigail.”

He nods his head and looks to his left as though the answers are over there somewhere. “We went to Minnesota.”

Hannibal hears a rehearsed quality: he’s been thinking these thoughts and little else since he woke up.

He shivers and shakes his head, trying to explain the event to himself. “She… didn’t come back with me.”

Then he looks up and makes eye contact. A more haunted, terrified, lost person Hannibal has never seen. He extends a hand to Will.

“Show me,” he says.

Will pulls himself up and says nothing when Hannibal steadies him. Hannibal opens the door and Will stutter steps inside. Will leads him toward the kitchen before stopping as though he can’t go any farther. He stands shakily for a beat before Hannibal guides him to an arm chair.

Will nods toward the sink, his meaning unmistakable.

“In a moment,” Hannibal says, placing a clinical hand on the back of Will’s cold neck. “Where will I find a thick blanket?”

Will, staring at nothing, breathes fearfully several times and swallows before he answers. “Closet… Hall closet.”

Belatedly, he thinks to gesture toward the closet with his head, his arms still wrapped tightly around his body as he shivers. His need to suffer for his sins has always been a problem. Only Will Graham would make the shock of waking like he did worse by sitting in the cold.

Hannibal selects a thick wool blanket and drapes it over Will’s shoulders. Then, careful not to seem overeager, he steps toward the sink and finds the organ in excellent shape. Everything went to plan.

“I don’t remember going to bed last night.” Will’s voice carries from the hall like the rustle of death.

“I must have, but…” he says, looking off into the distance again as he searches his memory. “Maybe I got up…” Will rambles, trying to find some explanation to make the reality of a dead girl’s ear in emesis in his sink not equal a murder rap. “…to let the dogs out, and then…”

“When was the last time you saw Abigail?” Hannibal asks, his eyes still on the ear.

“…and my feet were muddy...”

“Will,” Hannibal demands, allowing the anger he feels over Abigail to come to the surface. Will stops babbling and looks at him. “When was the last time you saw Abigail?”

“Yesterday,” Will answers immediately. Steadily. Assuredly. He swallows. “At her father’s cabin.”

Hannibal scrutinizes him.

He begins wavering. “I had… an episode…” he breathes nervously, “ah… she said something was wrong with me… she was afraid of me.” His face hardens, but he seems to be trying to convince himself rather than Hannibal. “She ran away.”

“What happened,” Hannibal demands. “Why was she afraid?”

Will looks at him with desperation, begging him to believe. “I hallucinated that I killed her.” He pants and shakes his head as Hannibal looks away. “But it wasn’t real.”

Hannibal looks mournfully at the ear, playing the part of the devastated but emotionally restrained adoptive father. He shakes his head.

“I know it wasn’t real,” Will insists.

He walks to Will, crouches next to him, and runs a hand along his face as though the reality of the situation has just set in for him. He waits a moment with his hands clasped together before looking up.

“Will,” he begins, “we have to call Jack. You can’t run from this.” He studies Will’s face as Will listens. “It will only be worse.”

Will returns his scrutiny before nodding slightly.

“Get dressed,” Hannibal says as he stands and walks toward the kitchen to call Jack.

Hannibal keeps an eye on Will, who hasn’t moved, as he pulls the cordless phone from its charger. Jack answers before the second ring.

“Will!”

“Jack,” Hannibal says quickly but calmly. “It’s Hannibal Lecter.”

He hears Jack’s apprehensive in-take of breath on the other end. “What happened?”

“It appears Will has harmed Abigail,” Hannibal says. “He claims he took her to Minnesota but returned alone after experiencing a hallucination in which he killed her. Jack.” He pauses as if marshalling his resources. “There is… a regurgitated ear in his sink.” He allows just a hint of revulsion and sadness to enter his tone.

For a moment, Jack says nothing. The air between them leadens with guilt.

“Can you keep him there?” Jack asks, his tone demanding but voice soft.

Hannibal exhales. “Certainly. He’s in shock.”

Now Jack exhales. “I’ll be there soon. Dr. Lecter… Hannibal, I’m sorry.”

Hannibal sighs. “As am I.”

Will is staring at his hands when Hannibal rejoins him.

“Jack is on his way,” Hannibal says softly.

Will nods vacantly.

“I’m going to pick some clothes for you,” Hannibal instructs.

Will stares ahead blankly. He takes a long breath before he nods.

Hannibal crouches again, ducking his head to try to catch Will's eye.

"Will – "

"I'm okay," Will says, blinking and glancing at him with the distanced eyes of the shock victim. "Just need a minute."

Hannibal chooses dark colors from Will's immaculately stored wardrobe. Presenting the clothes to Will, he waits to see how much of his help will be required. But Will takes the shirt and begins dressing like an automaton.

Will is buttoning the shirt when he speaks. "You saw this coming," he says hollowly, still staring into the distance. "You told me… not to drag her into my delusion."

He stops; his hands still as he's about to push a button through. Hannibal's heart beats a dozen times before he continues.

"But you didn't stop me."

Hannibal allows the charge to linger in the air. Beneath his profound interest in Will's raw humanity lies a pit of remorse for the loss of such promise in Abigail. He takes a breath.

"I deeply regret the outcome," he begins. "I came to regard Abigail as family. As I did you, Will." He glances quickly at Will and sees in his expression a stabbed heart. "To lose you both at once…"

Will swallows heavily and nods, rubbing his hands together. He looks as though he might speak, then seems to think better of it. He slumps unconsciously; Hannibal can fairly see a yoke of anguish around his neck.

"As to why I did not intervene…"

Will looks over at him with weary interest. Hannibal waits a beat and says, "Perhaps I trusted too much."

His gaze shifts to Will's for a second before he looks away. Misery lurks under lingering shock.

One of the larger dogs approaches Will and nudges his hand. Will hardly acknowledges the animal, patting it distractedly.

Hannibal has to remind him to finish dressing. They sit quietly for a long time before Jack arrives.

Hours pass and Will does little more than sit and breathe. His heart beats in his ears. He feels distant. Detached. Removed. He has nothing to say to Jack, nor to his former colleagues

who'll be shaking down his house for forensics. The familiar route to Quantico passes like a movie. For a long time, he wonders whether he can press pause.

Again and again he runs through what he remembers. Visiting Hannibal's office yesterday. Going to Port Haven. Driving Abigail to Dulles. The flight. Driving out to the cabin. Following her upstairs. Her fear.

I was the lure. Did Hannibal tell you?

Betrayal. Accusing her of helping her dad.

You think I'm the Copy Cat?! You think I killed Marissa?

If you didn't kill her, Abigail, then somebody you know did.

Ever think that somebody could be you?

Of course. Especially because his memory cuts out there. But as uncertain as he is about how he left things with Abigail, he's certain he didn't kill any of the Copy Cat's victims. The evidence isn't there. Sutcliffe in particular.

You're clean. You couldn't have done this without getting something on you and there's nothing on you.

I don't feel clean.

Will looks down at his hands. The dried blood is still there. He knew it would be. He can smell it, faintly, beneath the odor of sweat and dirt. The dirt on his hands is consistent with digging. He wonders idly if dirt is under his fingernails, too.

Because despite the dirt on his hands and the ear in the sink, he doesn't feel guilty. He feels fairly clean.

Maybe it's shock protecting him. But it's hard to feel guilty about something he can't recall.

How would I swallow a whole ear?

That's the strangest part. If he did dissociate, if he did become Hobbs and finish what he started – but Hobbs wouldn't eat an ear. Not raw or whole. In a soup, probably, but not the way Will did. Will recalls a hunting tradition in which the hunter eats raw the heart of the season's first deer, but, having retched several times after he first vomited, he's sure there's nothing else in his stomach.

Maybe in the act of killing her, he became a more mundane psychopath, one who takes trophies and swallows them whole.

No, the ear makes no sense.

Nonetheless, the hallucination in which he impaled her on the antlers replays vividly behind his eyelids at seemingly random intervals. Even when his eyes are open. Those bright,

innocent doe eyes bore into his.

Will starts when the car door opens. He blinks rapidly at the light. He hadn't even noticed that they'd stopped moving.

Eyes down, Will follows two agents he's never seen to the BAU. He supposes he should be grateful they haven't cuffed him, but the formation – two agents in front and behind – is just as obvious.

Price and Zeller treat him with professional distance. It's easier that way for everyone, Will thinks. He feels as removed from them as he would if he were on standing on the surface of the moon. He listens to them catalog the handful of items in his clothes, and though he's had that pocket knife since he was a teenager, it could be anyone's pocket knife. What, after all, does a condemned man own save his skin?

It's Katz who treats him like he's human. He knows she will. He doesn't know how he feels about it, still too cocooned by shock to feel much of anything.

Katz's hand is warm through the latex when she holds his fingers and scrapes under his nails. He hadn't realized his skin was as cold as he feels inside. Flecks of dried blood fall from his nails. Maybe dirt, too. It's hard to tell.

Katz sighs. "I can't do the silent treatment," she says. She looks over at him. "I can't pretend I don't know you and I can't pretend we both don't know what I'm finding under your nails."

Will stares at his hand. Vacant, colorless emotion – blessedly flat since the initial terror – takes on pale hues. He feels his tongue loosen. Like he might be able to bring himself to speak.

Katz, frustrated, paces away from him. "You called me once because you didn't trust yourself to know what was real. This blood is real, Will."

"I know," he says.

"Do you know how it got there?"

Everything pallid brightens. His memories become sharper. The terror in Abigail's bright blue eyes bursts into to Technicolor.

"Not with any certainty, no."

"Certainty comes from the evidence," Katz says with conviction. "I didn't want to find any evidence on you. I wanted to be certain about who you are, but you can't even be certain about yourself."

She couldn't be any more correct. "Not anymore," Will whispers.

"If you weren't certain with yourself, you shouldn't have been here," she says. "This is the FBI."

He looks at her for the first time and remembers the color and shape of their relationship. He owes her all the truth he has to give.

“I thought I would get better.”

“You’ve always said you interpret the evidence, so do it, Will,” Katz challenges. She looks down at the flakes of blood on the table and back up to him. “Interpret the evidence.”

Will stares into space intently. “According to the evidence,” he begins – and something about saying it makes him crack at last. Emotion rises up in his throat and he can’t keep it off his face.

“I killed Abigail Hobbs.”

Katz looks away and Will can’t tell what she thinks, so wrapped up is he in the reverberation of his admission, echoing in his skull like it’s the last statement he will ever make.

Ended. He feels ended. Over. Finished.

Suddenly, he understands in his gut why he won’t be allowed shoelaces once he’s placed in a cell.

He feels small. Confined. As though he ought to take up less space. As though he has no right to take up any space at all.

But now that he’s come back to himself, he can think. Remember. Feel.

He doesn’t notice Bev leave, or that he’s begun to shake slightly. His muscles are tense with fear and anger, but he’s weighed down by a deep, abiding sadness.

And yet he keeps returning to the emptiness of memory and the strong sense that he didn’t do what the evidence says he did. The scratches on his arms and feet. The blood under his nails. The ear – *how would I swallow a whole ear?*

Will ponders that question as two guards walk him to a secure shower. Under the hot water, his arms seem to belong to someone else. The sting of soap in the scratches is remote. The dirt muddying the water as it circles the drain can’t be from digging a grave.

With his bare hands? In bare feet? Without much of the dirt coming off when he wore shoes on the plane home?

Had to be from sleepwalking, he thinks as he soaps his shins. Will the soil type match the mud around his house or that of Minnesota?

Even as he feels distant from reality, part of him desperately wants the forensics reports. Katz is right. It’s all in the evidence. And the evidence, though overwhelming, is not without inconsistencies.

Numbly, he turns off the water and dries himself with a poor excuse for a towel. Thin underclothes accompany an orange jump suit. The uniform of the wicked.

He thinks of a narrow bed in a cell and shivers. As the guards escort him to an interrogation room, he searches his memory again for some spark, some sign of an answer.

Nothing.

Will puts his head down on the table and reviews his slowly sharpening memories once again.

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